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The Indian Mazeppa;

OR,

The Madman of the Plains.

A Strange Story of the Texan Frontier.

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AUTHOR OF "INJUN DICK," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN
BOB," "KENTUCK, THE SPORT," "OVER-
LAND KIT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CANYON DE UVA.

"Still he urges on his wild career."

Down through the dark and fearful chasm of the rocks, called by the Mexicans the Canyon de Uva, and by the Indians, the "Gate to Hell," ran the waters of the Rio Sabinal.

The stream had laughed and danced, along over the shelving rocks, rippling golden in the sunlight, but as it entered the frowning portals of the canyon it became a dull and sluggish stream—a river of ink. The dark walls of the canyon, stretching upward as regular as though plied by giant hands in far-off ages, with a stern and angry frown forbade the sunbeams to toy with the pure and sparkling waters.

The red braves had aptly named the gloomy passage when they called it the portal to the shades below.

Many a dark and gloomy legend the old men of the Comanche and Apache tribes told of "The Gate to Hell."

Not a red brave for a hundred miles around would trust himself within the gloomy canyon after the evening shadows had closed in upon the earth and the night winds stirred the grasses and flowers that hid the surface of the prairie; yet many a brave warrior trod in the Comanche



IT WAS A BLACK SLEED, COVERED WITH SORE, AND A SORE A HELPLESS WOMAN LASHED TO ITS BACK.

moccasin or wore the plumed head-dress of the Apache nation. But the wild children of the prairie dreaded the evil spirits who—so wise men said—lurked within the gloomy canyon's center. They feared not a human foe, but the demon forms of the Gate to Hell they shrunk from.

The sun was sinking in the west; its last dying rays decked the prairie with a flood of golden light; the surface of the river shimmered with crimson and purple, strangely blended in together.

All was peace and rest; it was the calm of the wilderness—of nature in her wildest freedom unrestrained by the curbing hand of man.

Slowly the sun went down; slowly the bright tints faded into cold and somber gray; slowly the shades of eventide shut in over the prairie, the river and the canyon.

And with the darkness came a strange, peculiar sound; a sound that hushed the laugh of the rippling waters, and stilled the gentle rustling of the flowers waving in the dreamy breeze.

The echoes of the canyon rung out hollow and mockingly on the still air.

All nature seemed appalled.

Then with a scream, half human in its intensity of despair, a fearful thing dashed at headlong speed from the dark shadows of the gloomy gorge.

Half beast, half human!

A noble black horse, clean in limb, perfect in form and bearing the arching neck and symmetrical head that told of Arabian blood—of fair descent from the steeds of the desert, shod as with fire.

And on the back of the horse a rider that seemed a part of the steed.

A young and beautiful girl!

The warm color that flushed her skin told plainly that in her veins there ran the blood of two nations; mingled there was the "blue" blood of the Spaniard and the red life-current of the Indian, the master of the prairie.

Strange was the position in which she rode.

She was extended at full length upon the back of the horse, lying with her face upward. Strong lines of untanned leather, bound around her wrists and ankles, held her in her place.

Little wonder that she seemed a part of the horse, for she could move neither hand nor foot.

The cruel lashings cut into her flesh, and the dark-hued skin was swollen and bruised. The closed eyes and drooping head told that the girl was senseless.

She was habited in the fanciful Indian costume; the hunting-shirt reaching to the knee, and the dainty limbs below, so round and shapely, protected by gayly-fringed leggings. Her long hair, fine as silk and black as night's ebon mantle, floated down over the horse's shoulders in wild confusion.

The slight movement of the lips, as the faintly-drawn breath came through them, told that the girl still lived, although she seemed more like a corpse than aught else.

On went the horse at his topmost speed; his heaving flanks and the white foam that dropped from his mouth, showed plainly that he was exerting his utmost strength.

A hundred yards or so had the unshod hoofs of the flying steed countered on the prairie, when, from the dark recesses of the canyon—forth from the Gate to Hell—came a howling pack of great, gaunt wolves.

Huge beasts with flaming eyes and snapping jaws.

As the leader of the pack, a gray veteran whose shaggy coat bore many a scar, beheld the flying steed, a howl went up from his jaws that was answered by the rest of the fierce and famished brutes.

The horse, quivering with fright, dashed onward at headlong speed, but tirelessly behind came the pack.

Well was it for the dark-hued maid that sense had forsaken her—that she was unconscious of her peril.

For what crime had one so beautiful been doomed thus to ride to death—a Prairie Mazeppa?

CHAPTER II.

THE HEIR TO BANDERA.

FIVE miles above the town of Dhanis, on the Rio Sego, stood the hacienda of Bandera, a goodly mansion, built of unburnt brick, in the Mexican fashion. The absence of windows, and the loopholes for musketry that pierced the walls, indicated that the building had been framed for defense as well as for shelter.

And so it was, for Dhanis was on the frontier; beyond it lay the hunting-grounds of the wild red braves, who claimed the prairie as their own. Every now and then, with fire and steel, they swept down along the whole line of the Mexican frontier, for at the time of which we write, the Lone Star banner had not fluttered in the prairie breeze, and Texas was yet a Mexican province. Little by little the savage warriors forced back the line of civilization, and every year they held the ground they won. No wonder then that they despised the Mexicans, and laughed at them in derision.

Within the principal apartment of the Mexican mansion sat a middle-aged, stern-faced man, and a young and beautiful girl. The two were father and daughter.

Ponce de Bandera was a man of fifty. Though his hair and beard were grizzled, and his face lined by the unrelenting fingers of time, yet he was as straight in figure and as firm in step as when, thirty years before, he had worn the steel morion of the soldier, and kept step to the martial music that heralded the advent of the ruling Spaniard.

Giralda, the sole daughter of the house of Bandera, was girl of twenty. In person she was tall and straight, a very queen in bearing; her face a perfect oval, set in coils of jet black hair; her eyes, black as night, sparkling like coals of fire, and yet as soft as velvet in their liquid tenderness.

Few could pass the queenly Giralda without the wish for a second glance.

The face of the father was stern and forbidding as he gazed upon his child. Evidently he was disconcerted.

"Giralda, you are a foolish girl!" he exclaimed, impatiently; "you act without sense or reason. From your haughty bearing one would think that you owned all Mexico."

"Am I not the heiress of Bandera?" asked the girl, a smile upon her moist, red lips.

"The heiress of Bandera?" the father said, slowly, a peculiar expression on his dark face.

"Yes; ever since I can remember, that has been told me. When I was but a child, the herdsman, who took me in his arms, and on the back of a flying steed galloped with me over the prairie, pointed out the countless herds of cattle, the vast droves of horses, then waved his hand in a circle around him, and said, 'All this is yours, little one; you are the heiress of Bandera. Twenty thousand acres are trod by the hoofs of your father's herds, all yours.' Have I not reason to be proud, then?"

"Be careful, else your pride may have a fall," said the old man, significantly. "Remember that this young man is one of the greatest land-holders in our province; his family, too, is good; the Tordillas can hold up their heads in the presence of royalty itself. They trace back their line to Ruy Diaz, the Cid, the Champion of Bivar."

"And yet, with all his wealth—with all his high descent, I do not care for Ferdinand Tordilla," replied Giralda, carelessly.

"And therefore are you a foolish child," retorted the father, harshly. "What other young man in our province can compare with him? If he so willed, he could build you a palace of golden ounces."

"One of the herdsman once gave me a nightingale; the lattice that held him prisoner was a gilded one, but the poor bird pined for the branches of the pinion tree, and the flowers of the prairie; he beat his wings against his prison bars until his heart broke; and then he found freedom in the grave. The arms of the man I could not love would be prison bars to me; like the bird, I should struggle to escape. Gold is powerful, father, but love more powerful still."

"And do you love?" cried the father, quickly.

For a second a glance of fire shone in Giralda's dark eyes, and then the ebon-fringed lids hid them from view.

"I love—" she said, slowly, "yes, I love you, father."

"And no one else?" he demanded, quickly.

"Who else should I love?" she replied, softly.

"You are playing with me, Giralda," the old man said, sternly. "I have eyes, and I know you too well to be deceived. You object to the suit of Ferdinand Tordilla, because you fancy some one else."

"But, father, if I understand you rightly, you urge me to accept Ferdinand because he is the richest man in our province—"

"No, no!" cried the father, quickly, "not solely for that reason alone, although of course it has weight; but he is also young, handsome, a dashing cavalier, fit mate for beauty. Do not think, my child, that I wish you to wed a money-bag. Look around upon the young men of our province; is there one of them that can compare with Ferdinand?"

"But if I do not care for him?"

"Tut! you do not know your own mind. You are but a butterfly passing from flower to flower, with no thought except for the present. Tordilla's wealth will buy you every thing that heart can desire."

"Except peace of mind," Giralda said, dryly.

"That is a fantasy!" cried the father, impatiently.

"Why should I covet his wealth when I am the heiress to Bandera? When, far as the eye can reach, east, west, north and south, all that I look upon will one day be mine? If report speaks truth, few estates in all Mexico are larger than Bandera," and the beautiful girl raised her head with a gesture of pride as she spoke.

"Suppose some sudden blow should rob you of these broad acres, what then?" the old man asked, meaningly.

"That can never be," the girl replied, confidently. "Who can destroy yonder prairie, drive off the herds of cattle that fatten on its surface, or remove the ounces of gold that the bankers of Mexico hold to your credit?"

"Five hundred paces from the hacienda rolls the Rio Sego; it is calm and placid, now; a child might brave its power; yet I have seen it, a giant in strength, sweeping along the mighty pinion trees, and the tall cottonwoods on its bosom as though they were but straws. Some day the Sego may rise again and spread desolation and despair along its banks. Then, too, a hundred miles to the north there dwells a race of feather-garnished warriors; their skins are red, their hearts not white. The great Comanche chief, whom his brethren call the White Mustang, has sworn never to rest while the hacienda of Bandera guards the approach to Dhanis. Some day the red chiefs will come with fire and steel, and then, the vulture and the wolf will make their home here."

"I do not fear, father," replied the girl, proudly. "The Comanches came last year, but when they retreated many an Indian pony who had borne a living warrior, carried a dead one."

"Yes, but since that time, the White Mustang has become the chief of the tribe, and he is by far the ablest warrior in all the Comanche nation."

"Still I do not fear."

"Perhaps there may be another claimant to the estate. You know that it came to me by my brother's death," the father said, slowly.

"You can not frighten me, father," replied Giralda, smiling. "I know that such a thing can not be. You only say this to make me accept the suit of Ferdinand."

"Time will tell you whether your suspicion be true or false," and there was a grave look on the stern face of the old man as he spoke. "Giralda, do not attempt to deceive me; I know the reason why Ferdinand's suit is distasteful to you. That reason did not exist three days ago."

"Do you think so, father?" and there was a half-smile on Giralda's proud face as she spoke.

"Yes, for just three days ago, the American, whom the herdsmen call Gilbert the Mustang, came to Dhanis."

A burning blush swept over Giralda's face, and the long lashes closed down over the dark eyes.

An angry look clouded the face of the Mexican as he watched the play of Giralda's features.

"If I had doubted, your face now would have removed my doubts," he said, with a bitter accent. "For the sake of this unknown adventurer, whose only future lies in his rifle, his hunting-knife and lasso, you reject the hand of the richest gentleman in all our province. By the saints, girl, I swear you are mad! What witchcraft lies in the blue eyes of this American that he should fascinate you at the first glance, as the snake fascinates the bird?"

Giralda did not reply, but her glowing cheeks and downcast eyes betrayed her secret.

"Girl, I would rather see you in your grave than married to this American adventurer," the father exclaimed, harshly. "Banish him from your thoughts, for with my consent you shall never see him again."

Without a word, Giralda rose and left the apartment, but the expression upon her face boded defiance rather than submission.

An angry frown was upon Ponce de Bandera's brow as he watched the heavy door close after his daughter's light form.

"I shall have some trouble in bending her to my will," he muttered, "but she must obey. The blow may fall at any time which robs us of these broad acres and makes us beggars."

A servant conducting a stranger into the apartment interrupted the meditations of the old man.

Looking up, Bandera beheld a rather shabbily dressed man, whose garments were covered with dust. In person the stranger was above the medium height, and his massive and well-knit frame gave promise of great strength; his face was handsome, lit up by great black eyes, fringed by coal-black hair, worn long; and falling in wavy masses down along his neck; a long narrow mustache graced his upper lip. The face of the stranger bore evident marks of toil and exposure to sun and wind. There was a rakish look about the man that betrayed the adventurer in every movement; cruel lines about the eyes and mouth that told of fierce animal passions.

Bandera gazed with astonishment upon the new-comer.

The stranger nodded familiarly to the Mexican, and then addressed the servant.

"Son of my heart, you needn't wait—you can get out—vamos! Your master and I have business to transact in private."

In wonder the servant withdrew, while Bandera asked himself if it was a madman who stood before him.

"You do not remember me, eh?" the stranger asked, with a smile, which revealed his white, fang-like teeth.

"No."

"That is wonderful," the stranger exclaimed, mockingly.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am called Lope, the Panther, by my friends; by the world at large, Senor Don Lope, a gentleman of limited means but of large expectations. I sometimes tell stories—wonderful stories! I can tell of a hacienda attacked at midnight by a band of Indians whose leader wore a white skin; of a man killed by the one who should have given his own life in his defense; of a lovely mother falling beneath the knives of the savages; of two helpless children sold to death. Oh! it's a wonderful story!"

"I do not care to hear it!" Bandera exclaimed, impatiently.

"Oh! do you not?" asked the stranger, sarcastically; "not care to hear of the wonderful escape of the two babes—how they grew to age, and then came to claim the estates—Bandera?"

"Ah!" the Mexican started to his feet in astonishment.

CHAPTER III.

THE PANTHER'S OFFER.

THE adventurer looked at the Mexican, a peculiar smile on his bronzed features.

"Aha! it is getting interesting, isn't it?" he asked, mockingly.

Bandera frowningly scowled upon the stranger, but replied not.

"Oh, you need not look at me that way!" the "Panther" cried, sneeringly. "I have faced angry men before now, and they had gleaming steel in their hands, too, and brown muzzled weapons of death, but I quailed not. By the way, senor, you are strangely lacking in hospitality; you haven't even invited me to be seated. *Voto-a-brios!* I'll help myself to a chair, since you forgot to offer me one."

And then the adventurer coolly sat down, extended his legs lazily along the floor, thrust his hands in his pockets, and laughed in the face of the Mexican.

With a powerful effort Bandera choked back the rage that was swelling in his heart.

"You spoke of some one coming to claim the estates of Bandera," he said, again seating himself.

"Exactly."

"What do you know of this affair?"

"Every thing."

"You will excuse me if I doubt that."

"In five minutes I will remove your doubts," said the adventurer, confidently.

"Do you think that possible?"

"Listen to my wonderful story, and judge."

"Go on."

"Twenty years ago, Juan de Bandera, your cousin, possessed the vast estates now held by you."

"There is nothing wonderful in that statement," interrupted Bandera; "that fact is known to all who resided in this neighborhood twenty years ago."

"Don't be impatient, and don't interrupt me, or you will make me lose the thread of my story," replied the adventurer, coolly. "You know that, good! Many other people know it, better! Before I get through, I'll tell you something that

neither you nor anybody else knows. I alone, and no other living soul, possess the wonderful secret."

"I am waiting," said Bandera, dryly.

"Your cousin, Juan de Bandera, twenty years ago was a young and handsome cavalier, but a cloud was ever on his brow and he loved the solitude of the great prairie better than the bower where beauty dwelt. You see my story will not be all dry detail, but embellished with sundry poetical adornments," and the adventurer waved his hand gracefully in the air as he spoke.

"Proceed, sir."

"Patience, gentle senor; never hurry a woman before her looking-glass, a man who is going to be hung, or a storyteller in the practice of his vocation. To resume: Men wondered why the wealthy Juan courted solitude, and many a pretty girl wished that she could find favor in the eyes of the wealthiest man in the province. But manly curiosity and woman's witchery alike were vain; Juan's secret remained a secret still; bright eyes, scarlet lips, and blushing cheeks had no power upon his frozen heart. Possibly you can tell why it was that your cousin avoided what men generally seek—woman's love?"

The scowl upon Bandera's face deepened, and the lines about the mouth and eyes were harder and more cruel than ever.

"Why do you recall the past?" he asked.

"Simply that we may understand the present and guess at the future," Lope replied, smiling blandly. "As you do not seem inclined to speak, I see that I must reveal why Juan de Bandera fled from man and hated woman. He had loved a young and beautiful girl; she returned his passion, or pretended to do so, much the same thing, you know. He reveled in the bliss of that delirium that dreamers call love, and wise men folly. When he awoke, it was a terrible awakening. The idol of his soul proved false to the vows she had sworn, and under cover of the night, fled with another. I won't ask you to tell me who that other was, because, of course, you don't know. His name was Ponce de Bandera."

The Mexican sat like a statue, and moved not a muscle.

"By the saints!" cried the adventurer, with a bitter laugh, "the name is the same as your own; strange coincidence, isn't it? But, to return: The foolish beauty forsook the man who loved her better than his own life, who was wealthy enough to give her every thing that her heart craved for, and chose one whose only gifts were a head of ice and a heart of iron. But woman will be woman, you know. What can you expect of a sex whose only reason is, 'because?'"

"Come, sir, to the point!" cried Bandera, sharply.

"Exactly; Juan Bandera, in disgust, left the gay world, and sought consolation amid the wild-flowers of the prairie. His penniless cousin kept a close watch upon him. Not content with robbing him of his heart's idol, he thirsted after his broad acres. He thought that despair might kill; but Juan de Bandera took the most cruel revenge. In a hunting excursion on the prairie, he found a young Indian girl. She was but a child, barely fifteen. She had been badly wounded by a fierce buffalo. The Mexican took her home, cured her hurt, then married her. When the news of the marriage was brought to your ears—I beg ten thousand pardons, senor, I mean to the ears of Ponce de Bandera—the name is so like yours, that half the time I think you are the man.

"Well, as I have said, when the news reached him, he swore a bitter oath, and within two more years he swore more bitterly still, for a son and daughter were born to his cousin. Small chance was there of his ever inheriting the estates of Bandera. Then the wife of Ponce died; this was a terrible blow, for he loved her with all the passion that his iron nature was capable of. Like his cousin, he, too, possessed a son and daughter, heirs to his poverty.

"Then a demon thought took possession of his mind. If his cousin and his wife and children were dead, all would come to him. Few men would have thought of such a terrible deed, fewer still would have executed it, but he did. Now, senor, comes the tragedy. The night is dark, the stars in bed, and the moon hidden behind a cloud; the war-whoop of the Comanche sounds around the hacienda of Bandera; white-skinned Indians, decked in the garb and in the war-paint of the prairie chiefs, rush to the attack. Juan de Bandera, like a second Abel, fell by the hand of a second Cain; only, in this case, it was a cousin instead of a brother. The wife died, pierced to the heart by a random shot, but the two children—"

"Perished also, I suppose," interrupted Bandera, with a covert glance in the face of the adventurer.

"Did they?" and the Panther laughed; "my story says different. A herdsman attached to the household of Juan Bandera, with the two babes in his arms, escaped the attack, and on a fleet horse sought safety, and found it, on the prairie. This herdsman was a cunning knave; he knew how broad were the acres of Bandera; how valuable in time to come the heirs would be. He guessed, too, from whom came the blow that cost Juan Bandera his life. So he placed the two babes in safety, and sought for fortune elsewhere. Years came and went; now the herdsman has returned; he thinks it's time that the world should understand who are the heirs of Bandera. Take a good look at me, senor; I am somewhat older than I was twenty years ago; somewhat more brawny in muscle and darker in color, but I feel sure that you will remember me."

"You are the herdsman," Bandera said, slowly.

"Your wisdom does you credit; I *am* the herdsman. To speak more plainly, I am the man who holds the destinies of the estates of Bandera in his hand," and the adventurer closed his broad palm significantly as he spoke.

"I do not understand you," Bandera said, doubtingly.

"The saints forbid that I should tell you that you lie, to your teeth and in your own house, but you do, never-the-less," the Panther said, coolly. "You know what I am going to say well enough. I can produce the heir to Bandera; I can wrest the estates from you. How much will you give to have me keep back this heir?"

"Heir—there were two."

"Exactly, but I've only got one, the girl."

"And the boy?"

"Who knows?"

"To dispute the estates with me you will require undoubted proof that the person you produce is really the heir." Just a little bit of a sneer was in Bandera's voice.

"I generally look at my cards before I play," the Panther replied, smilingly. "When I escaped with the two babes I placed them in secure hands; had an account of the whole affair drawn up, and took such measures that, in after years, I could easily prove the identity of the two children."

"And the person with whom you placed the two?"

"Oh! of course I shall tell you that!" and the adventurer laughed long and loudly.

"Well, it is not of the slightest consequence to me," Bandera said, carelessly.

"Oh, no!" and the Panther laughed again; "my worthy and esteemed friend, I have dealt with tricky men before. I am playing for a great stake here, and I don't intend to lose a single point of the game."

"To business, then," Bandera said, abruptly. "You can produce this heir?"

"Yes."

"And for a certain sum you will agree to destroy all the proofs by means of which she can claim the estates?"

"Yes," and the adventurer rubbed his hands together glee fully: "it is really a pleasure to do business with a man like yourself."

"What are your terms?"

"Oh, a mere nothing," replied the Panther, carelessly. "I am tired of knocking about the world; I have been a football for fortune long enough. I would fain settle down; the life of a landed proprietor would suit me exactly. So just give me your daughter in marriage, make me the heir to the estates of Bandera, and I shall be satisfied."

Bandera sprang to his feet in wrath; his eyes fairly blazed with rage.

"Give my child to you, cutthroat adventurer!" he cried. "Son of the devil, hence, or I'll have you lashed from my doors! I defy you and your tale of lies."

For a moment Lope looked at the Mexican, astonished at the sudden outbreak; then he slowly rose to his feet.

"You defy me, eh?" he said, through his clenched teeth.

"Begone, beggar!" cried the angry father.

"Beggar! that is what you will be within a month, for within that time I'll strip you of the estates of Bandera."

Another moment and the Panther was gone.

CHAPTER IV.

GILBERT, THE MUSTANGER.

A LITTLE clump of timber overhanging the yellow waters of the Rio Sabinal, a dozen miles or so above the spot where

the river, like a frightened, guilty thing, plunged into the gloomy jaws of the terrible Canyon de Uva.

From the bank of the river the rolling prairie stretched north and south, east and west, the gently undulating surface, broken here and there by the little knolls and clumps of trees and bushes, known to those learned in prairie-craft as "Islands."

By the little bunch of timber, whose leaves drooped over the rippling water as though, like a fair and dainty girl, they wished to behold themselves mirrored in the stream, were two men.

The fashion of their garments, the cast of their features, their weapons—in fine, all about them, told plainly that neither Mexican, Spanish nor Indian blood ran within their veins.

The taller of the two stood by the bank of the stream, leaning upon a long rifle—one of the kind famous in our border history, and called, from the stalwart woodmen who bore them, Kentucky rifles.

His eyes were bent in dreamy meditation upon the rippling water. He was a young and handsome fellow, with his manly, well-proportioned form, his yellow, curling locks, bright blue eyes, white skin—though now somewhat darkened by the warm kiss of the day-god—and rosy cheeks. A perfect picture of health, of manly beauty, was Gilbert Vance, better known, though, along the frontier, as Gilbert the Mustang, than by his own proper name.

The Mustang was attired in a suit of buck-skin, fancifully trimmed with porcupine-quills, stained red and black, yellow and blue, the work evidently of some dusky maid, daughter of the prairie.

The companion of the Mustang was a man of forty. He, too, was dressed like the other in the prairie garb, but his hunting-shirt and leggings showed traces of toil, and of fierce hand-to-hand encounter.

In person, he was a little above the medium height. His eyes were a clear gray in color, sharp and piercing in their glance; his hair a curious mixture of gray and yellow. His face was seamed with many a line, and told plainly of hardships suffered and of dangers braved.

He also was armed with the long Kentucky rifle, that carried a ball hardly larger than a pea, and yet in the hands of the skillful borderman was certain death to game or foe at a hundred paces. A long hunting-knife, whose blade bore many a dent, was thrust, sheatheless, through the belt of untanned leather that girded in his supple waist.

The prairie-chief—and well he deserved that title—was known as Davy Crockett; the surest shot—the keenest eye on the trail, from the Missouri to the Gulf, and the best Indian-fighter that ever drew "bead" on a painted, moccasined warrior.

Crockett was lazily reclining on the grass, busily engaged in hacking off a piece of tobacco from a huge twist, of the brand commonly called nigger-head.

Now and then he cast his eyes shrewdly upon the moody face of the young Mustang, and a quiet smile appeared upon his honest features.

Ten paces from the two men two horses cropped the long grass, sociably side by side.

One, a dark-brown mare, clean in limb, broad in shoulder, and bearing the unmistakable marks that told of blood and high descent; the other, a forlorn-looking mustang, dirtily yellow in color—a clay-bank—the hide singed here and there as though the beast had passed through a prairie fire; the evil eyes, the ears laid back on the head, betrayed that the animal's temper was far from being a good one.

The brown steed, "Mary," was the horse of the Mustang; the other, the mustang "Jerusalem," belonged to Crockett, and, like a singed cat, was far better than he looked.

"Say, Gil, tryin' to look a hole in the drink, eh?" exclaimed Crockett, suddenly.

The Mustang started, roused from his reverie; a half-smile came over his handsome face.

"No, not that exactly," he replied. "I was only thinking."

"'Bout what?" asked Crockett, shrewdly.

"Well, not any thing particular—"

"And a gal in gen'ral," interrupted the hunter.

Just a little shade of annoyance passed over the face of the Mustang.

"Why should you think that?" he asked.

"Thunder! think I'm a dod-rotted fool—lost my eyesight, eh? Why, Gil, I kin read your face jist as easy as a coon takes to a hollow tree, when three darkies and a yaller dorg

is arter him. I never do guess much, you know; be sure you're right, then go ahead; that's my motto!"

"You think, then, that you can read my thoughts in my face?" Gilbert asked.

"May I never put my old hide outside of a pint of good old Kentucky corn-juice ef I can't!" replied Crockett, confidently. "Why, you're in love with this 'greaser' gal, the darter of that sour old cuss, Bandera, the big dog round this hyer clearin'. Over head an' ears in love, an' your feet stuck in the mud at the bottom so fast that nothin' on airth 'cept the gal's lips, a fat priest, an' a weddin'-ring will ever pull you out of it."

"You are a shrewd guesser, Dave," the young man said, with a sad smile on his manly face, "but I will not own that you have guessed the truth, for to even dream of winning this peerless girl, so bright in her beauty, so holy in her gentleness, is as foolish as the wish to tear down a star from the sky above us. She is too good for me; never until I stood in her presence, saw the angel in her clear eyes, the purity that bespoke itself in every look, every motion, did I understand how utterly unworthy I am of the love of such a woman."

"Oh, wake snakes, an' come at me!" cried Crockett, in astonishment; "have I been keepin' company with any sich ornery cuss as you have jist made yourself out to be? Wa-al, now you kin jist take my ears for pin-cushions if I would have believed it, if you hadn't a-said so yourself!"

Gilbert laughed at Crockett's comic despair.

"You understand me well enough. We have not shared the same blanket for three years without your knowing me truly. I may be worthy to be your friend, Crockett, and yet not worthy to take this girl from her home and friends to live for me alone. I can not well explain the feeling, but she seems so far above me, so utterly out of my world. I approach her as the heathen would draw near to the sacred image which he worships. There is an air of sanctity enshrines her which forbids close contact. I should almost as soon think of asking the stars to descend and place themselves within my grasp as to ask this girl to bless me with the holy, priceless treasure of her love."

"Gil, the gal that can't love, ain't half a gal," said the hunter, shrewdly. "Why, it's woman's nature to love something, 'tain't a fault. The good Ruler that put the instinct into our hearts, didn't put it there not to be used. Why, that diamond-eyed feminine is jist sp'ilin' for some good, wholesome he-critter to love. Lordy, she's got more good old tenderness locked up in that little heart of hers than thar's skeeters in a cane-brake." And Crockett brought his hand down upon his brawny thigh as if to give emphasis to his words.

Gilbert laughed, but did not reply.

"Go in an' win," continued the hunter; "it's a poor shoat that's afeard of himself. Why ain't your chance as good as anybody else's? Go for it, like a sick kitten for a hot brick!"

"But if she should not care for me?" Gilbert said, slowly.

"You'll never know unless you find out, an' you'll never find out unless you try. She's human, so are you. Maybe she is an angel an' you ain't; she'll fetch you up to her side, never you fear. That's jist what sich angels are sent into this hyer world for; for to make us poor sinners a durned sight better than we are. Why, this 'greaser' Tordilla is a-shinnin' round her, like a hungry b'ar round a big bee-hive," exclaimed Crockett.

"I had an idea that he was in love with her," said the Mustang, thoughtfully.

"Sartin! why, a man kin see it with one eye. Ain't goin' to let that yaller don carry off your angel, are you? I reckon that ef it were me, I'd walk into his affections putty lively, jumping Jehospat!"

"He is wealthy, and I—"

"A man!" cried the hunter, "an' that's what a gal wants. Sho! she ain't a-goin' to ask whether you own a thousand acres or only the six foot of sile that we'll all fill when we go under. You've got health, strength; ef you can't carve out a home for the gal you love, you don't ought to have her."

"Right, Crockett!" cried the Mustang, suddenly and decidedly. "I will try for this girl's love—for I do love her—if a thousand rivals stood in my way. I think the girl likes me, but it is so hard to tell sometimes. Her eyes have seemed to look kindly upon me, yet it may be only the kindness that her gentle heart teaches her to bestow upon the stranger. But, win or lose, she is a prize worth years of toil to gain, and once my own, I feel that her love would make

for me that heaven on earth, which in my life of toil, I never yet have known."

"Maybe the greaser won't cuss some of you git the gal!" said Crockett, chuckling.

"I think he fears me," the Mustanger said, thoughtfully. "Dave, I did not tell you why I sought the prairie to-day, but now I will. I met this Ferdinand Tordilla last night. A few bantering words passed between us, half-jest, half-earnest, regarding my skill as a Mustanger. There is a wild, black stallion on the prairie that never yet has felt the lasso of the capturer. I have wagered my rifle against twenty gold ounces that, within three days, I will bring the wild stallion into Dhanis."

"The horse is said to be mad," said Crockett, reflectively. "I have often heard of him; the Indians call him 'The Lightning.' He has killed a dozen or more who have attempted his capture."

"Within three days I will tame The Lightning or Gilbert the Mustanger will never throw lasso more!" cried the young man, firmly.

Then over the crest of the rolling prairie came a fearful thing.

It was a black steed, covered with foam, and it bore a helpless woman lashed to its back.

On came the horse, maddened with fright, and a score of hungry wolves yelled at his heels!

"By heaven, it is The Lightning!" cried Gilbert, in astonishment.

With the speed of the wind the horse flew by. The Mustanger and Crockett vaulted into their saddles and followed in pursuit.

A fearful ride! A Prairie Mazeppa!

CHAPTER V.

THE DEFIANCE UNTO DEATH.

A VAST prairie, covered with the greenest of grass and decked with thousands of wild flowers, redolent with perfume.

As far as the eye could reach the prairie extended. It was broken here and there by small clumps of timber fringed by circles of bushes.

The prairie was the "divide" that separated the waters of the Llano and Guadalupe on the north from the Nueces and Frio on the south.

In the center of the vast prairie stood a tall and stately white oak tree; a giant in stature when compared to the knotted trunks of the trees of which the "prairie islands" were formed.

The white oak stood solitary and alone; a very forest chieftain in its might.

Darkness still hovered over the prairie, but faint, gray lines afar off in the eastern skies heralded the coming of the day-god.

Slowly—little by little, the gray lines of light grew broader and broader. The night, like a spirit of evil, gathered up its dark mantle and stole silently away.

The birds woke, and from their coverts in the tall grass, and in the leafy limbs, welcomed the coming morn with gladsome notes.

As the light grew stronger and stronger it revealed a score of sleeping men stretched upon the prairie beneath the branches of the oak; a score of horses corralled together, and a mounted sentry, a hundred paces from the tree, who, motionless as a statue, kept ward and watch.

What manner of men are these who rest as snugly upon the broad bosom of the prairie and sleep as sweetly as a babe nestled on a young mother's breast?

A single glance and we guess the truth.

We are looking upon the warriors of the famous tribe of "horse" Indians, known far and wide, to friend and foe, as the great Comanche Nation. The proud savages who call themselves the "masters of the prairie," and well they deserve the vaunted title.

The daylight strengthens.

One by one the warriors waken. The scanty morning meal is partaken of, and then, with many an earnest glance southward, the warriors sit in groups beneath the spreading branches of the oak and wait.

One used to the men and manners of the Comanches would speedily have guessed that it was no common cause

that had brought the warriors beneath the oak, for the party was composed of the greatest chieftains of the tribe.

Yon tall, dark chief was the wily Ah-hu-la, whose band pitch their lodges by the swift-flowing stream, known to the Spaniards as the Devil's river. The brawny and short-legged warrior by his side is the "Big Leaf," whose wigwam is o'ershadowed by the Painted Rock, and whose horses drink out of the yellow Rio Grande. The stern-visaged veteran who sits apart from the rest, is the mighty chief, known far and wide as the "Apache-slayer," and his band dwells where the Concho cuts its way through the mountain passes to the plain. And of all the chiefs who sit and wait so patiently, not one but has won a name for great and glorious deeds.

The Apache-slayer gazed afar off over the prairie; his glance was the glance of the hawk.

"Wah!" he exclaimed, in deep tones, "let my brothers look!" and with outstretched finger he pointed to the south.

The warriors bent their eyes in the direction indicated by the chief.

On the line of the horizon was a little black speck; it grew larger and larger; the keen eyes of the Indians detected that it was a horse and rider.

Silent and motionless as statues the chieftains sat and waited for the stranger to approach.

It was evident that he was expected.

Larger and larger the black speck loomed up against the clear sky, until at last it stood revealed—a milk-white horse and an Indian rider.

We say an Indian, for the rider was dressed in the buckskin garb dear to the heart of the wild sons of the wilderness, and wore eagle-plumes curiously twisted in his long raven locks, but his face was whiter far than the face of any one of the dusky warriors who waited for him beneath the shadows of the oak.

It was the famous Comanche chief, the White Mustang, who rode so rapidly over the prairie; the warrior, reputed to be the greatest fighting-man in all the land washed by the Rio Grande del Norte, from where the white sierras frowned upon the prairie to the yellow sands of the Mexican gulf.

The White Mustang dismounted from the milk-white steed—a barb of matchless beauty—and, standing upon the prairie, faced his brothers.

In person the chief was strangely unlike the rest of his nation. He was tall, sinewy and supple; all the savage grace of the panther, all the strength of the mountain king, the grizzly bear. Straight as a pine, elastic as the willow. His face, with its high cheek-bones and brilliant black eyes, showed plainly the Indian, and yet from the color of the skin one would have doubted.

The explanation was a simple one; few Mexicans on the frontier but would have guessed it in an instant. One of the parents of the chief was red; the other, white.

The Comanche chiefs were noted for their liking for white squaws, and many a blooming Mexican girl cursed the hour when bitter fortune made her the captive—wife—slave, of some red-skinned warrior.

The White Mustang sat down in the circle of chiefs.

The pipe, filled with the fragrant weed, was passed from mouth to mouth.

The smoke wreaths floated on the air; they seemed to be omens of peace, but, in reality, were the harbingers of blood and slaughter.

The Apache-slayer was the first to speak.

"The Comanche chiefs have waited for two suns—the first rides the white cloud steed and dazzles the eyes of the earth braves with the glare of his golden robes; the second rides the white horse of the prairie; he dazzles the eyes of all by the splendor of his deeds. Both are welcome."

The White Mustang inclined his head gravely at the compliment.

"The White Mustang has summoned his brothers to council—let them open their ears and they shall hear why. The Great Spirit gave this land to the red-man—it is his—and the white-skins must be driven back into the great salt lake from whence they came. Many moons ago, the lodges of the white-skins dotted the prairie; little by little have the red chiefs driven them back till the prairie is no longer pressed by the white foot; but their lodges are amid the canyons and by the rivers. They must be destroyed. The Mexican moon will soon come. The Comanche Nation must carry fire and steel to the walled lodges of the pale-face; not go as two, three bands, but as one."

The guttural sounds that came from the throats of the warriors told their assent.

"The White Mustang is a mighty warrior. When he treads the prairie, his foes fly like the dead grass before the wind," the Big Leaf said. "Let him say when the Comanches shall mount and ride to death."

The White Mustang rose to his feet and pointed to the crescent-shaped moon still visible in the sky.

"When the moon dies, and the new moon is born, then will the red warriors strike. By the Sego lie the Mexican lodges that the white-skins call Dhanis. The lodge of Bandera guards the approach to the home of the pale-face. The Comanches will swoop on Bandera as the eagle darts from the tall pinion down upon his prey."

"It is good!" cried the Apache-slayer, and the other chiefs gravely nodded their consent.

The White Mustang took his seat again.

There was a moment of silence. The chief swept his dark eyes around the circle; a thoughtful expression was on his massive features.

"The chief would speak more?" Ah-hu-la said.

"The lodge of the White Mustang is cold; no singing-bird sings for the chief," the red brave replied.

"There are many maidens in the Comanche tribe who would gladly sing in the lodge of the White Mustang, for he is a great chief," Big Leaf responded, gravely.

"The singing-bird that the Comanche chief seeks does not dwell in the wigwams of his tribe, but his brothers can give her to him. She is a white-skin, the flower of Bandera. Her eyes are as black as the cloud of the angry spirit; her step as light as the elk stealing before the morning wind. The Mexicans call her Giralda Bandera."

"It is good; the White Mustang shall have the Mexican singing-bird!" the Apache-slayer exclaimed.

"Wah!"

The cry of alarm came from the sentry. The warriors sprung to their feet and seized their weapons.

Rapidly approaching on the prairie was a single horseman. He was mounted on a sturdy steed, whose powerful limbs and massive neck betrayed its Spanish blood.

The stranger was clothed in a garb composed of skins of various wild beasts, curiously sewed together; the garb was tattered and torn as though the owner had ridden hard through brier and bramble.

The man was gigantic in form, a perfect Hercules. His face was massive, the eyes like coals of fire. His long black hair and beard floated down around his neck and shoulders like the mane of a lion.

The Comanches gazed with astonishment upon the stranger.

Straight toward them, despite their brandished weapons, the stranger spurred his steed.

A dozen paces off, he halted and leaped nimbly to the ground.

"I seek the chiefs of the Comanche Nation!" the stranger cried, speaking in the Indian tongue.

Amazed, the Comanches gazed upon him.

They asked themselves who was this man who spoke their language like a brother.

The stranger bore no weapons, except a broad-bladed hunting-knife thrust carelessly through his girdle.

"My brother seeks the Comanche chiefs; what would he with them?" the White Mustang asked.

"Fight them to death!" cried the stranger, a ringing note of defiance in his voice.

The chiefs stared at each other in astonishment.

"My brother seeks the Comanches alone to dare them to the death?" the White Mustang asked.

"Yes; I am appointed by the minister of vengeance to be the slayer of the Comanches!" cried the stranger. "Red dogs, tremble! I am the Madman of the Plains, the Sword of Gideon. One by one I will fight you unto the death!" And the stranger drew the broad-bladed knife and stood in defiance.

CHAPTER VI.

PROOF 'GAINST LEAD.

THE Comanche chiefs looked at each other in grave astonishment. They could hardly believe their ears as they listened to the bold defiance of the strange being, clad in the garb of skins.

The White Mustang was the first to speak.

"My white brother speaks big; is his heart as big as his words? Does he know that he is in the land of the Comanches?—that he is helpless in the hands of the red-men?"

The stranger started at the sound of the White Mustang's voice, and gazed anxiously into his face. The warriors looked on in surprise.

The strange being passed his hand slowly across his brow, and a wild gleam came into his eyes.

"That voice," he murmured aloud, as if unconscious that listening ears were near; "it is *her* voice! Oh! how it comes back to me from the lapse of distant years! Again I see her dark eyes beaming with tenderness; again I hear the words of love coming from the scarlet lips; but all this is a dream," he added, wildly. "You are a chief among these red dogs, although your skin is as white as mine."

"My strange brother speaks straight. The White Mustang is the great chief of the Comanche nation," said the young brave, proudly.

"The Comanches are dogs, whose hearts are white! the prairie wolves shall come and howl in their wigwams, one by one shall they fall beneath my hand, and, like a hungry coyote, I will lap up their hearts' blood, drop by drop!" cried the strange being.

A yell of defiance came from the throats of the red chiefs, as, with brandished weapons, they advanced upon the stranger.

With a motion swift as the forked lightning bursting from the thundercloud, the madman seized the White Mustang, bent him over his knee, as if he had been but a slender boy instead of a stalwart warrior, and pointed the keen-edged knife at his heart. The point ripped open the stout buckskin shirt, and grazed the polished skin that shone like tinted marble beneath. The Comanches recoiled in horror.

So sudden had been the attack, that even the White Mustang, wily warrior that he was, had been taken entirely by surprise.

Vainly the chief struggled; he was but as a child in the powerful grasp of the stranger.

"It is written in the stars that the Comanches shall fall one by one by my hand!" cried the madman, wildly. "The sword of Gideon shall smite with righteous strength. The blood of the Comanches shall stain my blade till the pure steel blushes crimson, and weeps scarlet tears. I am the Madman of the Plains—the angel of vengeance. Fire and steel, bullet, arrow or knife alike, are powerless to harm me. My mission is vengeance. Even now I would give this red chief to death, and his soul to the flames below, but that *her* eyes look at me out of his. Accursed devil, why do you bear *her* face!" And in his rage he brandished the glittering knife in the face of the young chief.

The iron features of the White Mustang never quailed, though death seemed so nigh. Slowly he closed his eyes, and the death-song of his tribe came slowly and lowly from his lips.

Transfixed with horror and astonishment, the red chiefs gazed upon the strange scene; spellbound they moved neither hand nor foot.

"You are the chief of these red slayers, whose souls are stained so deep with innocent blood, that angels' tears would not wash them clean, and yet I spare you. *Her* eyes in your face stay my hand, and bid me not to strike. But there will come a time when *her* eyes will not save you, human wolf that you are. For the present you are safe. You shall live—live to commit more bloody acts, to stain your soul still deeper with innocent blood; but, sleeping or waking, in your wigwam or on the prairie, alone or surrounded by your red wolves, my face shall haunt you, my voice ring in your ears; you shall see the flash of my steel, live, but live a living death till in the torments of the doomed you shall call aloud for the avenging blow which brings forgetfulness and rest!"

Then, with a mighty effort, the madman lifted the White Mustang from his feet, and, swinging him in the air as if he had been a child, threw him, with tremendous force, from him into the circle of chiefs.

The Comanches, grouped together in a little knot, spellbound with wonder, did not anticipate this sudden movement, and the White Mustang, hurled sideways through the air with all the force of the stranger's astonishingly muscular arms, came against them with a terrible shock, and the red chiefs tumbled pell-mell to the earth.

With a leap, like unto the panther's in swiftness, the mad-

man sprung to the side of his horse, and, with a single bound, vaulted into the saddle.

The noble beast waited not for a word, touch of rein, or prick of spur, but like an arrow forced from the bow, darted forward.

With a wild scream of defiance, the madman tossed his arms in the air, as he rode rapidly over the prairie.

The White Mustang was the first one of the Indians to recover his feet.

With a glance of horror he gazed upon the strange being who had handled him so roughly.

One by one the warriors rose to their feet, amazement written on each face, a dread fear in each eye. Wonder-struck, like their chief, they gazed upon the flying horseman.

"An evil spirit!" cried Ah-hu-la.

"A white devil!" muttered the Big Leaf.

Straight forward, over the flowery prairie, the madman urged on his wild career. A hundred paces had the hoofs of his steed covered, when suddenly, he wheeled around his horse and halted.

Defiantly he faced the red braves and brandished the glittering knife high in air.

Shrill and mockingly his wild laugh rung over the prairie.

The sound seemed to rouse the White Mustang from his stupor.

"Man or devil, I fear him not!" the chief cried, in rage; then he plucked the heavy Spanish gun, so fancifully decked with gay ribbons and waving plumes, from where he had placed it on the ground.

The chief raised the piece to his shoulder, drew back the hammer and leveled it full at the breast of the madman.

The wily eye of the savage drew sight along the short, brown barrel; his hand quivered with rage, although the blood in his veins seemed chilled to ice.

The madman saw the motion, guessed the intention of the Indian, but held his place silent and motionless as a statue; on his face proud defiance.

A moment the dark eye of the White Mustang glanced along the iron tube, then, obedient to the pressure of his finger, the hammer fell; the sparks that came from the flint proved that its heart was fire.

A puff of smoke—a tongue of flame, and the leaden ounce sped on its way.

Breathlessly the warrior watched the horseman.

His massive figure stood out dark against the sky as though carved out of stone.

The ball whistled harmlessly by his head; the arm of the White Mustang had trembled, his aim had been untrue.

With a groan the chief dashed the useless weapon down to the earth.

Hoarsely and with mocking accent the laugh of the madman rung out on the prairie breeze.

With a cry of desperation, the red chief snatched the other musket—there were but two in the party—from the hands of Ah-hu-la.

"Fire, red wolf!" cried the horseman, in derision, perceiving the intention of the chief; "bullet and steel alike I defy; the lightnings of heaven alone have power on me. Mortal arms and mortal weapons can not harm me!"

On the wings of the wind came the daring words to the ears of the chiefs, and as the madman spoke he extended his arms as if he wished to expose his breast to the bullet.

With a sullen frown upon his features, the White Mustang drew the musket to his shoulder; carefully and slowly he glanced his eye along the barrel. With an effort that taxed all his power, he stilled the leaping blood within his veins which had unnerved his arm.

Once again the warriors held their breath in great suspense, as if the very sound that told of human life would work some direful harm.

Again the hammer fell, again the flints met in close embrace and the sparks flew; again the white smoke-puff, the quivering flash of flame, and the leaden messenger of death cut its way through the intrenchant air.

Eye true—aim sure and arm firm as rock!

The ounce ball struck the madman full in the breast—the aim was for the heart; scarce half an inch above, the bullet spent its force.

The madman reeled in the saddle!

Then, in the throats of the red chiefs gathered the notes of joy, but they pealed not on the air, for in a second the madman sat again like a rock in the saddle.

The bullet dropped, flattened, to the earth.

The madman was unharmed.

The Comanches gazed upon him with awe-stricken faces. The White Mustang seemed like one turned into stone.

With clenched hand brandished in the air, breathing defiance, the strange being spoke:

"A hundred years shall come and go, but I shall still live to smite the braves of the Comanche Nation. I can not die while a red wolf of that tribe treads the prairie; father and son alike shall fall until their bones, piled one upon the other, shall make a ladder for me to mount to the skies and pluck down the blazing stars; blood shall flow till the green prairie be as scarlet as the gory soul of the red slayer!"

And while the blood-curdling laugh of the madman rung on the air and froze the life-current of the red-men within their veins, he wheeled his horse around and dashed onward at headlong speed.

"He flies from us—he fears!" cried the White Mustang, who alone seemed not wholly spellbound by horror.

"The ball struck him full in the breast, yet he shows no wound!" exclaimed the Big Leaf, in wonder.

"The powder was bad—the force of the ball spent ere it struck him," the White Mustang replied. "Did it not shake him in the saddle? If he was a white devil the ball would have passed through him as through the air."

The Comanches opened their eyes widely at this reasoning, and stared at one another.

"The White Mustang will take his scalp, be he man or devil!" cried the chief, fiercely, as he vaulted into the saddle.

"Who follows?"

Not one remained behind, and in a minute more the red warriors were racing over the prairie.

CHAPTER VII.

CHASING THE LIGHTNING.

SWIFTLY onward over the rolling prairie rode the two Americans in chase of the flying steed and the helpless rider, so strangely fastened onto its back.

The wolves, alarmed at the presence of the new-comers, with howls of rage gave up the chase, and bending their course to the west, disappeared behind one of the prairie islands.

Side by side, Gilbert the Mustanger and Crockett rode on, the wiry mustang of the latter making tremendous efforts to keep up with the swift, blooded brown mare ridden by the Mustanger.

"By heaven, it is 'The Lightning!'" Gilbert exclaimed, as the black horse ascended one of the prairie swells, and his form stood out in bold relief against the sky.

"The animile that the greaser wants, eh?" asked Crockett.

"Yes; not that I think that he wants the horse, only that he judges that its capture is impossible. He hates me; wishes some chance to annoy me. He knows full well that I value my rifle highly; he wishes to deprive me of it, and so banter me into this wager. If I had refused it, he would have openly proclaimed that I was afraid to undertake the task of subduing 'The Lightning,' and thus throw a doubt upon my courage. He loves this beautiful Mexican girl, and fears that I may attempt to rival him."

"I reckon he knows what he's about; he didn't stand any more chance with you in attempting to captivate the 'fections of that full-blown sunflower, than a coon would attempting to hug a b'ar to death," Crockett said, shrewdly.

"Your friendship makes you look with a more favorable eye upon my chances than they deserve," Gilbert replied, with a doubtful shake of the head.

"Not a mite!" Crockett cried, emphatically. "But, I say, Gil, Jerusalem can't stand this pace much longer; the he-beast is a-gettin' tuckered; I kin tell it by his ears; they're 'ginnin' to lop over, and that's a sure sign he's got 'bout all he wants."

"I must keep up the chase, then, alone; my brown beauty is fresh; I have not pushed her to her topmost speed," the Mustanger replied, patting the arching neck of his steed as he spoke.

"Jerusalem is as tough as an alligator, an' full of grit to the backbone, but this hyer pace is a-cuttin' it a leetle too fat for him."

"I judge from the looks of yonder beast, this fearful speed will soon break his heart. Did you not notice the white foam-marks on his heaving flanks as he galloped past?" Gilbert asked.

"Yes, but he's keepin' it up as if he were a-runnin' for a man's life."

"Perhaps a last desperate effort; he may go to pieces at any moment."

"Stick to it, Jerusalem, you long-eared little cuss!" cried Crockett, "lifting" the mustang with the reins as he spoke, "and I swear to hookey I'll let you go to grass for a week."

Onward over the green and flowery prairie raced the coal-black horse that bore such a fearful burden on its back. The glossy black coat was stained with snowy foam; the eyes of the beast, so dilated with fear that they seemed to start from their sockets; blood was oozing slowly from the nostrils. The powerful legs, so graceful in their sinewy beauty, were stained with lather and splashes of yellow mud, the latter sure proof that the wild and maddened course of "The Lightning" had passed through the soft bottom-land of the Rio Sabinal.

On the polished skin of the helpless girl, so cruelly bound to the back of the wild steed, the drops of blood were standing; the lashings which held her in her place had cut into the soft flesh and drawn forth the visible evidence of terrible pain.

Side by side the two Americans rode in pursuit. The heaving flanks of Crockett's mustang told plainly of strength overtaxed; the brown mare, though, chafed and tugged at the bit; she felt all the excitement of the chase, and panted to display the speed which she was capable of, for as yet she had not exerted her utmost strength.

"By hookey, Gil, the leetle cuss can't stand this much longer," Crockett exclaimed. "Say, hadn't I better pull up an' try a rifle-shot at that black beast?"

"But the danger of hitting the woman!"

"Right smart chance of that, I reckon," replied the hunter, dubiously.

"The beast is running unsteadily; the shot intended for him might kill the girl."

"That's gospel," Crockett muttered.

"Aha!" Gilbert cried in triumph.

The flying steed had caught its foot in a hole concealed by the grass of the prairie, tumbled to its knees with a heavy shock, and then, with a desperate effort, had bounded to his feet again.

But "The Lightning" no longer sprung forward like the wind; the strength of the horse was failing fast. The beast swayed unsteadily from side to side as it galloped onward. The proud neck that had been carried like an arching crest high in the air, was now drooping to the earth; the blood was streaming freely from the nostrils, the flanks heaving with a rapid motion that spoke plainly of failing strength.

"Who-whoop!" the ringing Indian shout of triumph went up from Crockett's lips, as he beheld the Mustang falter.

Gilbert loosed his rein; the brown mare sprung forward at increased speed; Crockett fell into the rear.

"Go it, ye cripples!" the hunter yelled in delight.

Little by little the brown mare gained upon the wild horse. The Mustang uncoiled the lasso from the horn of his saddle and carefully poised it in his hand.

Snorting with affright at the near approach of his pursuers, the prairie steed bounded onward, straining each nerve and muscle to its utmost tension.

Vain was the effort; the blooded brown mare, within whose veins ran the Godolphin blood, whose sire and dam had won many a silver prize in "Merrie England," was far too speedy for the wild son of the prairie, whose hoof had never felt the farrier's touch, who had known no master save his own sweet will.

A hundred feet only now separated the pursued and the pursuer. Crockett had slackened rein and fallen behind.

So near was the Mustang that he could trace each outline of the delicate form lashed so securely to the back of the horse.

The girl was young—beautiful; the wavy mass of coal-black hair that floated so carelessly in the air rivaled in its luster the glossy coat of the steed; the fair round face with its warm, sun-kissed tint, the perfect form, all combined to make the ideal of a painter's dream.

Gilbert noted the beauty of the girl, and wondered at the human marvel placed in such terrible danger.

He saw where the lashing cut into the tender flesh, understood how securely the girl was bound to the back of the wild horse.

"The men who did this terrible deed must be devils at

heart," he muttered, urging his horse on with hand and heel. "What crime could this girl have committed that she should be punished in this terrible manner?"

Again the wild steed stumbled; the brown mare gained a dozen yards. Another desperate effort "The Lightning" made to escape from its untiring pursuer; fruitless the attempt; not a single foot of ground did the wild steed win.

The Mustang settled himself firmly in the saddle and prepared for the throw, the lasso ready in his hand; a few minutes more and he would be near enough for the attempt.

The girl bound to the back of the steed showed no signs of life.

"Is she dead?" the Mustang muttered as he drew nearer and nearer.

Hardly a dozen yards now separated the horses. A minute more and the lasso whirled onward, thrown by the skillful hand of the Mustang.

The leathern cord cut through the air in snake-like coils. The whirr fell upon the ears of "The Lightning;" he understood its meaning only too well; not four-and-twenty hours before the griping cord had encircled his free neck, and in its life-strangling coil had taught him that he was a slave.

A desperate leap the wild steed gave; the lasso fell short and just grazed the neck of the horse; the beast started at the touch as if its flesh had been seared by a hot iron.

The Mustang spurred on his horse and again coiled the lasso in his hand.

"Poor beast, you but prolong your suspense," he muttered.

The speed of the wild horse lessened; the desperate efforts had impaired his strength. Foot by foot the Mustang gained upon him; barely ten feet behind was now the brown mare.

No sign of life the girl showed to the anxious eyes of the American.

"She is dead," he muttered again.

Then once more he whirled the lasso through the air; again "The Lightning" made a desperate effort to escape; vain struggle against fate. The noose fell round his neck. The well-trained steed of the American threw himself back on his haunches, braced to sustain the shock.

The lasso tightened, the noose gripped the neck of the wild horse like a band of steel.

Maddened with fright and pain the wild horse reared in the air, and shaking his head with desperate effort, strove to free himself. Then came the shock. With a despairing groan like unto a human in mortal agony, the wild horse rolled on its side, a single convulsion shook its frame, and "The Lightning" was dead; its big heart, choked at the loss of freedom, had burst.

Gilbert spurred his horse to the side of the dead steed.

A single look the brown mare gave at the motionless prairie king, and then, with almost human quickness, realizing that death had chilled the heart of the wild horse, with wild plunges of terror essayed to escape from the spot; so terrible is death even to the brute.

The Mustang loosened the lasso from the horn of the saddle, then wheeled the mare off to one side and dismounted. The horse was trembling in every limb with fright.

By this time Crockett had come up. He, too, dismounted, for the yellow-gray mustang was fully as loath to approach the dead horse as the steed of the Mustang.

Together Gilbert and Crockett stood by the side of the prostrate beast. They cut the lashing which bound the inanimate form to its back. Eagerly they bent over the girl.

"Is she dead also as well as the horse?" the Mustang asked.

"No, she lives, by hookey!" Crockett replied.

CHAPTER VIII.

RAISING THE DEAD.

CROCKETT gazed earnestly into the face of the girl; there was no sign of life there, but his hand, pressed upon her little wrist, detected the faint throb that told of pulsating blood.

"Are you sure that she lives?" Gilbert asked, in doubt, for the face of the girl seemed to him to be the face of a corpse.

"Sartin—sure as shootin'," replied the hunter, confidently. "She's had an awful time of it, but she's worth a dozen dead gals yet. Jist place your finger on her wrist, hyer."

Gilbert did so; the feeble throb convinced him that life was not yet extinct.

"If we had some spirits we might revive her?" he exclaimed, anxiously.

"I'm your man!" cried Crockett, with a comical wink; "reckon I don't travel fur without a leetle drop of whisky, for fear of accidents."

Then from an inside pocket of his hunting-shirt the hunter produced a small flask covered with leather.

"Reg'lar old tanglefoot—bore a hole through a side of sole-leather!" he exclaimed, in triumph. "This will fotch her quicker'n a wink; it's powerful revivin'. I say, Gil, if I ever go under in a tussle, jist put a bottle of this to my nose an' give me a smell; if I don't take a suck at it, you can bet I'm a gone coon, for sure."

The hunter poured some of the liquor into the hollow of his hand, and bathed the girl's mouth and nostrils with it. Gilbert looked on anxiously.

The rigid face of the girl betrayed no sign of life. A look of amazement came over the bluff features of the hardy hunter.

"It don't fotch her worth a cent, by hookey!" he murmured in astonishment.

"Yet she is not dead."

"No, but she's so pesky nigh it, that she might almost as well be."

"Pour some of the whisky down her throat."

"Easier said 'han done, Gil," Crockett said, with a shake of the head. "An alligator stickin' to a defunct colored individual isn't a circumstance to the way she's got her leetle teeth shut together."

"Let me force them open with the point of my knife!" the Mustanger exclaimed, kneeling by the side of the girl.

"Her mouth ain't bigger 'n a rosebud, anyway," Crockett observed; "she's jist a reg'lar double-twisted screecher of a beauty."

Daintily and tenderly the Mustanger lifted the girl from the body of the dead steed and held her in his arms. The shapely head with its great masses of coal-black hair, fine as silk and lustrous as polished ebony, lay motionless upon his breast. The great eyes were closed, but the long dark lashes that swept the bloodless cheek, gave visible promise of the wondrous beauty that was hid beneath.

"Ain't she a pictur'!" cried the hunter, in admiration.

"She is, indeed, beautiful," the Mustanger replied; "but now let us try to restore her. See if you can not pry open her teeth with your knife, while I pour the whisky in. I feel sure that if we can succeed in getting a few drops down her throat, it will revive her."

"It's strong enough to make a man forsake home and friends an' go an' climb a tree," Crockett observed, with a grin, as he passed the flask to the Mustanger. "I reckon it would fotch me back if I had one foot in the grave an' t'other was precious shaky. Talk 'bout chain-lightning, 'tain't a circumstance to this fluid. Why, a good strong pull at this would fotch a man right out of his boots an' make him feel as lively as a fat shoat with a 'painter' arter him; two pulls at it an' a feller would forgive his mother-in-law an' all the people that he owed."

"Quick! let us try its marvelous power on this poor girl," the Mustanger said, with an anxious glance into the motionless face.

With a touch as tender as the young mother nursing her first-born, the rough hunter inserted the point of the broad-bladed hunting-knife in between the pearly teeth. Gently, but firmly, he forced them open.

With a nervous hand Gilbert poured the whisky into the little mouth; a dozen drops or so found their way in between the ivory barriers to the throat.

Crockett withdrew the knife and the little teeth again closed together. But as the fiery liquor trickled down the throat of the girl, a slight, convulsive motion pervaded her frame. Slight as it was, it did not escape the keen eyes of the two men who, so tenderly, were trying to nurse her back to life.

"It's a-goin' to fotch her!" Crockett cried, in triumph. "I reckon it would take the h'ar right off a b'ar's hide if you put 'nuff on."

"It has called back the life that I feared was gone for ever."

"Who in thunder do you suppose could have bound the gal on that hoss?" Crockett questioned.

"I can not guess," the Mustanger replied, with a shake of the head. "I can not understand how any human being could have a hand in such a terrible deed."

"Wa-al, somebody did it; the gal never tied herself on; there's some critters in this world mean 'nuff to do any thing."

"From the fashion of her dress I should judge that the girl was an Indian, and yet her face is as nearly white as mine," the Mustanger said.

"She's a half-breed."

"Does not belong to a tribe, eh?"

"No; you kin tell that by her moccasins. They're neither Comanche nor Apache; 'bout the only two tribes that frequent these hyer parts."

"Her pusle is beating faster; the whisky has revived her."

"Gin her another dose; hit her ag'in with it; I told you that it would fotch her!" Crockett exclaimed, in triumph.

This time the aid of the broad-bladed knife was not needed, for the rigid muscles of the face had softened. A generous draft of the villainous liquor—for it was nothing better—the Mustanger poured down her throat.

Again the convulsive shudder shook her frame; but this time far more violently than before.

"I reckon that's kickin' up a small yearthquake inside," Crockett observed, a look of profound wisdom on his face. "If that air gal's throat's got any bark left on the inside of it, I reckon it must be made of sheet-iron."

Little by little the life came back to the nerveless form of the prairie flower.

"Bring me my blanket, Crockett, please," Gilbert said, when he noticed that the color was coming back to the white lips of the girl.

Crockett unstrapped the blanket from the back of the saddle on the brown mare, and brought it to the young man.

The Mustanger placed the blanket, all rolled up as it was, upon the ground by his side, and then carefully removed the girl's head from its resting-place in his lap and placed it upon the rude pillow thus afforded; kneeling by the side of the girl, he waited for her to once again wake to consciousness.

Crockett, leaning upon his rifle, stood calmly regarding the two.

Slowly the great black eyes unclosed, and with a vacant stare the girl looked around her.

"Oh, this terrible torture!" she murmured in tones so full of anguish that it stirred the hearts of the listeners with pain. It was evident that she did not realize that she was no longer on the back of the wild steed a helpless prisoner, borne onward with the speed of the wind to almost certain death.

"Oh! Virgin Mother, save me from these terrible wolves!"

Again in her waking consciousness she saw the perils that had surrounded her fearful ride.

"Wa-al, the skunks that tied this poor child on that hoss ought to be strung up to a tree so high that it would take a year to finish the job!" the hunter exclaimed, in honest indignation.

"Hush!" Gilbert said, warningly.

The dark eyelashes swept the cheek for a moment, then again the brilliant eyes opened.

The glance around now was one of wonder. The girl was amazed to find herself free. She looked at her wrists; the lashings were gone, but the purple marks—bracelets of bruises—told where they had cut their way into the flesh.

Then for the first time her eyes fell upon the two men who were watching her so eagerly. In astonishment she gazed upon them.

"North Americans!" she murmured, in wonder. She had guessed their country in an instant. And then she saw the lifeless form of the wild steed, the lasso still about his neck.

"Senors, you have saved me!" she exclaimed, in wild gratitude. "Oh! saved me from a torture worse than death it-self!"

Then she essayed to rise, but she miscalculated her strength. The fearful ride had weakened every muscle in her form. She sunk back again, half-fainting.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WILD MUSTANGS.

GILBERT moistened her lips with the powerful liquor again. The potent fumes restored her, and gratefully she looked up in the face of the young man.

"Oh, senors, I owe my life to you," she murmured, slowly. "Even now, when I think of the danger that is past, it makes me shudder."

"How came you in such a terrible plight—you escaped by a miracle only?" the Mustanger asked.

"I have bitter enemies," the girl replied, with a shudder, "and yet I have never wronged any one in all my life."

"Your enemies must be fiends to plan and execute such a vengeance upon you," the Mustanger said, hotly.

"I do not know why I am hated, and yet I am hated, bitterly," the girl replied, a sad accent in her voice. "They that hate me wish me dead. They sent me forth bound on the back of the wild steed to find a grave on the prairie."

"You know who your enemies are, then?"

"I can guess," the girl said, with downcast eyes, replying to the question of the Mustanger.

"Why not denounce them and have them justly punished for this terrible deed?" Gilbert asked.

"I am but a poor girl without friends; what can I do against my powerful enemies?"

"Without friends!" cried the young man, quickly; "no! you are wrong there. You are not without a friend while Gilbert the Mustanger lives."

"That's so, by hookey!" the old hunter cried, heartily, "an' you kin count me in, too. I don't mind havin' a spoon in this soup as long as it's b'ilin', even if I do git my mouth burnt."

"Tell us who has committed this terrible outrage, and we will do our best to right the wrong!" Gilbert said.

"Tell you?" the girl said, slowly, a strange expression upon her features.

"Yes."

"Spit it right out!" Crockett cried; "wake snakes! We'll make it hotter fur 'em than a cane-brake in July."

"I can not tell you," the girl said, her eyes cast down, her voice low and trembling.

"You can not tell us!" Gilbert exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Don't be afeard, little 'un," Crockett said, encouragingly. "We're only two, but when we git into a quarrel with the right on our side we fly round jist like forty."

"Did you not say that you knew who your enemies were?" Gilbert asked.

"Yes."

"Then, why do you wish to keep their names concealed?"

"I can not tell you that, either!" the girl replied, in great embarrassment. "Although they wished me to die by the most dreadful death that human mind can think of, yet I can not reveal who they are; I can not strike them in return."

The two Americans listened in amazement; they could hardly believe their ears. What motive could induce the girl to act in this strange manner? Such was the question that they put unto themselves, and which they were unable to answer.

A shrill neigh of alarm coming from Crockett's mustang attracted their attention. But, as they looked in the direction where the two horses stood side by side, they saw nothing to excite their alarm. The brown mare was leisurely cropping the grass, but the wiry mustang, with ears and nose extended, facing to the west, seemed terribly uneasy.

"What is the matter with your horse, Crockett?" Gilbert asked.

"Danger," replied the hunter, laconically.

Then he turned to the west, where the sun was sinking in a blaze of glory. Gilbert followed his example.

Far off on the line of the horizon was a small drove of horses, some dozen or so in number. They were in rapid motion, not heading exactly for the spot where the little group stood, but bending off in a line to the north.

"I see; a drove of wild mustangs," Gilbert said.

"Exactly; only that every mustang carries a painted Comanche imp," the hunter replied, dryly.

"What?" exclaimed the Mustanger, in astonishment, bending an earnest gaze upon the drove.

"Fact, by hookey! that little cuss, Jerusalem, kin smell an Injun five miles off, an' he hates 'em wuss nor p'ison. He'd kick the top off of any red-skin's head that came within reach of his heels ary day in the week. Do you s'pose a drove of mustangs would head toward us and our scent goin' right down to 'em on the wind? not a mite! they'd dust t'other way quicker'n a wink. It's the old Comanche dodge, a hidin' behind their hosses; when they git near enough, we'll see a moccasined foot over the mustang's back

an' a painted face looking out under the hoss's neck. I know 'em from daylight to darkness, the painted sarpints."

"We had better seek cover, then!" Gilbert cried.

"That knot of timber thar will do," the hunter said, pointing to some half a dozen scrubby oaks that grew together, surrounded by a fringe of bushes. "Take the gal up in your arms an' let's git. They're coming on mighty rapid."

With the hardy men of the border to think was to act. Gilbert lifted the almost helpless girl in his arms and followed in the footsteps of Crockett.

The girl had overheard the conversation and fully understood the danger that threatened.

The little clump of timber was reached. The stunted trees covered a space perhaps ten feet across, not over that.

With a shrill whistle the Mustanger called his horse. The well-trained beast understood the signal and came at once. The mustang was not slow to follow.

"Better make the hosses lay down behind these bushes," Crockett said; "that will screen them a little. The red imps will go for the beasts the furst thing."

The horses thus disposed of, the two examined their weapons and prepared for the coming danger.

The Americans were well armed, a rifle and a brace of double-barreled pistols apiece, besides their hunting-knives.

"We'll have ten cracks at 'em, an' there's only 'bout a dozen of 'em in all," Crockett said, watching the approach of the foe.

The mustangs came on rapidly. So well were the Indian warriors concealed by their steeds—for the guess of the wily hunter was right, each horse bore a painted chief—that one not used to the prairie would never have guessed that he looked upon aught else but a drove of wild horses.

As the mustangs came within half a mile of the little group of timber that sheltered the whites, they slackened their pace into a walk. One or two bent down their heads and appeared to be cropping the prairie grass.

"See the cunning of the sarpints!" cried Crockett, pointing to them. "Do you notice that they're gittin' nearer an' nearer, while they pretend jist as if they didn't know that we were hyer at all?"

"I think that gray mustang is within range," Gilbert said, after a careful glance; "suppose you try a shot on him, jist to let them see that we have penetrated their design."

"All right; I'll have to fire at the hoss, for the red imp don't show hide nor ha'r," Crockett replied. "Be ready with your piece, in case they make a dash at us arter I fire."

"If you could succeed in disabling one of them, it would render the rest less daring."

"They're p'ison sarpints; they're as patient as a wolf, an' jist as merciless," Crockett observed, with a shake of the head.

The gray mustang that Gilbert had referred to was approaching slowly with a sideway motion.

Carefully Crockett leveled his long rifle, and glanced his eye along the shining tube.

"I think that I kin see the red imp's hand gripped in the mane, but I ain't sure. Guess I'll tumble the beast over, an' trust to luck for the animile to fall onto the imp, an' bruise him a leetle."

"I'm ready for them in case they make a dash after you fire," Gilbert said, placing his rifle, ready cocked, across his lap.

The hunters were reclining on the ground, concealed by the fringe of bushes.

The girl had been placed in the center of the timber. Anxiously she watched the movements of her protectors. She had but escaped from one danger to be threatened by another.

Slowly and carefully Crockett drew "bead" on the mustang. At last the hammer fell, and the ball sped on its way.

The savage dreamed not of danger, for he little thought that he was within rifle-range. The sharp, whip-like crack of the rifle broke on his ears, and then the mustang tumbled with him to the ground.

CHAPTER X.

THE ATTACK.

THE rifle-shot produced a wonderful effect. It not only tumbled the gray mustang to the earth, but it placed a painted warrior with brandished weapon on the back of each

steed. With howls of rage they dashed onward, hawk-like, at one swoop to exterminate the daring foe.

Ten yards of ground had the mustangs covered in their onward rush when a second rifle-crack rung out on the prairie air, cutting in upon the Indians' war-whoops.

A brawny chief, leading the advance, reeled in his saddle, shook his feathered lance wildly in the air, clutched convulsively at vacancy, and then rolled to the ground, striking with a heavy thud.

He was dead—shot through the heart by the rifle-ball of the Mustang.

As the first shot had seemed to call the chiefs, like so many weird phantoms, into sight, so at the second shot they vanished as suddenly as they had appeared.

And now a little white smoke curling up lazily on the air, floating over the prairie island, and entangled in its boughs; a muscular chief, with massive face and brawny chest, gayly decked with the war-paint, lying prone on the grass, his stern features glaring haughty defiance at the sky, and the scarlet life-blood welling slowly from a little wound in his breast, just over his heart; a group of wild mustangs forging slowly in a half-circle to the northward, bearing always away from the prairie island, the covert of the hunters; and that was all.

One sign of life alone on the prairie; a bruised and battered warrior dragging himself from beneath the body of the gray mustang, and seeking shelter in the long grass.

The first shot, all life; the second, the stillness of the grave.

Quickly the two recharged their pieces.

"We've slightly astonished the durned cusses," Crockett observed, with a dry chuckle. "Lordy! I thought that they were goin' to ride us right down, they came on so pesky savage."

"They evidently have not been used to dealing with men like ourselves," Gilbert replied, with a quiet smile. "It is possible that it is the first time they ever heard the crack of a Kentucky rifle."

"You drilled a hole through that fellow as slick as a whistle."

"See! they have gathered together again."

"Yes, an' taken precious good keer to git out of range of our fire," Crockett remarked, surveying the Indians.

As he had said, the Comanches had betaken themselves off to a safe distance, and resuming their saddles, were apparently busy in council.

"They seem to be holding a consultation together."

"Plannin' some deviltry, or my name ain't Davy Crockett!" cried the hunter, emphatically.

"It will soon be dark," the Mustang said, after a glance at the western skies, where the purple clouds hung heavy and dank.

"An' the moment that darkness kivers us in, they go fur us tooth an' nail."

"If there is a warrior to each horse, there is but twelve of them, and we have already disabled two—for I judge that the fellow who rode the gray mustang won't have much stomach for fighting, as I hain't seen him since the horse fell, and so I judge that he is badly hurt—there is but ten of them for us to encounter," Gilbert said, thoughtfully.

"An' if we kin wipe out two more, t'other eight will think twice afore they go for us."

Then from the group of Indian horsemen came a single rider. He was a young chief mounted on a fiery white mustang of surpassing beauty.

Boldly he urged his horse on until he came, as he judged, within range of their fire. Then he reined in his horse and extending his arms, showed that he was weaponless.

"He wants a talk," Crockett said. The hunter had drawn a "bead" on the chief, and his finger played nervously with the trigger.

"Well, let us hear what he has to say," the Mustang replied.

"I could put a ball through him so quick that he'd never know what hurt him," Crockett muttered.

"No, no, Dave; that would be unfair!" Gilbert cried. "He is a bold fellow; he trusts to our honor!" let us not deceive him."

"Right, by hookey!" Crockett exclaimed, instantly dropping the butt of the rifle from his shoulder. "I reckon the red imp would go for us, though, if he got the chance—honor or no honor."

"That is possible; but we as white men ought to set him a good example."

"I'd rather set a bullet in 'tween his ribs," the hunter said, with a growl.

"I'll step forward and speak to him; cover him with your rifle for fear of treachery."

"Don't you be afeard!" Crockett exclaimed. "If he lifts his little finger I'll plug a hole through him so quick that he'll think he's sent for."

Then laying aside his rifle, Gilbert stepped forward into the open prairie. Like the savage he displayed his open palms, as assurance that he was unarmed.

The Indian dismounted from his horse and approached the American.

The two met just about half-way between the prairie island and where the Indians sat like statues upon their wild steeds.

The Mustang and the Comanche chief faced each other. A moment they looked, curiosity in their faces.

The Comanche chief was the famous warrior, the White Mustang.

The Indian was the first to speak.

"Wah! the red-man is glad to see his white brother, although he has stricken one of his braves to death with the long rifle that carries the little ball."

"Why does the Comanche chief dash on his white brother as the hungry wolves on the wounded buffalo? The prairie is wide—there is a track to the north, another to the south. Let my red brother take either, and the long rifle will not speak," replied the Mustang, speaking in the Indian fashion.

"The white chief speaks well. Young hand—old head." And then the warrior drew himself up proudly. "On the prairie there is but one road for the Comanche chiefs—straight forward, whither they list. My white brother has no business on the prairie. It belongs to the Indians. Let him keep to his walls built out of mud. Here the Indian is chief. If a snake gets in the path of a Comanche he walks over it."

"And if the snake bites the heel of the chief, let his brothers not howl that he dies," replied the Mustang, significantly.

"The White Mustang would not howl if he stood at the torture-stake and the flames were eating his heart out!" exclaimed the Indian, proudly.

"The White Mustang—chief of the Comanches?" questioned Gilbert, somewhat astonished at the youth of the warrior.

"The chief has said—he can not lie like a white snake."

"No, nor fight like one!" cried Gilbert, scornfully. "The Comanche is a coward who hides behind a horse."

"When the White Mustang speaks he says something. Squaws talk—warriors act," the Indian replied, calmly, although the angry veins were swelling in his temples. "My white brother is the horse-taming chief who came with the sun—far off?"

"Yes," Gilbert replied, wondering at the knowledge of the Indian.

A moment the Indian looked at the Mustang and measured him from head to foot. Gilbert could not guess the meaning of the gaze.

"My white brother is young—squaw away off?" and the chief pointed eastward.

"No," Gilbert replied, utterly in the dark as to the meaning of the strange question.

"Why does white brother stay here? better go home. The white chief will lose his scalp if he stays on the prairie."

"Will the chief take it now, or wait until he wins it?" the Mustang asked, sarcastically.

"If the Comanche pleases he can take the scalp now, but he does not care to harm the white chief if he will promise to go back to his own land straight. If not, let him sing his death-song."

Gilbert was sorely puzzled; what possible interest could the Comanche chief have in his departure.

"When the white chief gets ready, he will go, not before. His scalp will never dry in the smoke of a Comanche wigwam."

A moment the White Mustang glared upon the American, then, suddenly, with a panther-like bound, he sprung upon him.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LEADEN CASKET.

Down the street with a sturdy step strode the "Panther;" a smile played around his thin lips and an evil light shone from his dark eyes.

"By the head of my great-grandfather, Bandera shall bend unto my will or I'll strip the estates from him and from his beggarly line," he muttered. "First the papers and then the heir; first the mine, then the train of powder, and after that, the match which brings destruction. Bandera is not a man to be frightened by a word. I played boldly but he plays a bold game also. It is diamond cut diamond here. He guesses that I speak the truth when I proclaim that the heir to the estate lives; his face showed that plainly; but he doubts that I have that heir, doubts, too, if I can prove the identity of the child. He sees clearly; a hundred chances against me to one that I succeed, yet I'll stake my life that I fail not."

The confident smile upon the face of the adventurer fully showed that his heart was in his work.

"Now for my ancient friend, Diego, the host of the drinking-shop. I wonder if he will remember me after all these years?"

The "Panther" took his way down the road that led into the town. A half-mile or so and he came to an adobe hut, half hid by the green vines that clustered around the yellowish walls. A rude sign bore the legend:

"DIEGO, WINE-SHOP."

The eyes of the adventurer brightened as he noted the sign.

"In the old place," he muttered; "now if he is still in the and of the living I shall soon know what I wish to learn."

Lope entered the wine-shop and sat down at one of the little tables.

A peon girl, brown as a nut, and with the great dark eyes so common to the captive Indian race, soon appeared and inquired what she could have the pleasure of serving the stranger with.

"First your master," the Panther replied; "is the worthy host at home?"

"Yes, senor," answered the girl.

"Tell him that a gentleman desires to see him, pretty one," the adventurer said, gallantly.

The girl blushed under the flashing eyes of the swarthy stranger and withdrew.

"Good!" cried Lope, rubbing his hands in glee. "Diego, the first link in the chain; through him the papers, through the papers the person of this glorious Mexican beauty, Giralda. She is worth the winning. A man might well go through fire to win a maid such as she. I little thought, years ago, when I galloped over the prairie with her—a child—in my arms, that I should ever seek to win her for my own. Fortune plays strange tricks sometimes. The herdsman has changed somewhat in ten years. How often have I cursed the unlucky chance that forced me to fly from the neighborhood of Dhanis, thinking that the odds were against my ever being able to use the secret which fortune gave into my hands; but now, after ten years, I return and the trail is as fresh as though it was but yesterday I followed on it. I must surely be one of the devil's chosen ones." And the Panther laughed loud and long at the conceit.

The entrance of a thin-limbed, yellow-skinned Mexican, hardly more than a boy in years, checked the mirth of the adventurer.

The new-comer had glittering, evil-looking eyes and a face wherein craft was indelibly impressed.

"The senor wished to see me?" he said.

Lope looked at him in astonishment.

"Diego, the keeper of the wine-shop—"

"Exactly, I am he," the young man cried.

"By the Virgin! you have grown young then in the last ten years!" Lope exclaimed.

The host looked puzzled.

"Perhaps it is my father that you wished to see?" he said.

"Yes, if you are the son of the Diego who kept this shop ten years ago, it is your father that I wish."

"You can not see him, senor," the young man said, with a shake of the head and an attempt to look mournful; "he is at rest."

"Satan has got his own then!" Lope exclaimed, sarcastically.

The evil light that flamed from the eyes of the young Mexican told that he did not relish the jest of the adventurer, but he bit his lip and replied not.

"I wished to see your father on business, but perhaps you will do as well," Lope said.

"I am at your service, senor."

"Did your father die suddenly?"

"No, senor; he was ill some six weeks."

"Then he had time to make his peace with heaven, and arrange his affairs?"

The innkeeper looked astonished at the question.

"Certainly, senor," he replied.

"And the good father that attended him in his illness and smoothed his path to the other world?"

"Why do you wish to know?" Diego asked.

"Only for curiosity," the Panther replied, a baffling smile upon his lips. "Perhaps I wish to call upon him and learn all the particulars relative to the death of my old friend."

"Ah! you are the herdsman, Lope!" the young man cried, suddenly.

The adventurer in turn looked astonished.

"How did you know that?"

"You possess some secret—a secret concealed in a leaden casket; that casket you gave to my father to keep; he, dying, gave it to the priest to keep for you."

"Your information is astonishingly correct as far as I am concerned," Panther said, with a charming smile, but a look in his eyes though that contradicted the smile upon his lips.

"You are the herdsman, Lope, who ten years ago, struck a man dead in this very room and was compelled to fly for his life!" Then with a rapid movement the Mexican placed himself between the adventurer and the door.

Lope never moved, but regarded Diego with a quiet smile.

"Your life is forfeit to the law, murderer!" Diego cried.

"Really you chill my blood," Lope observed, and he caressingly pulled the ends of his long mustache as he spoke. "Will you have the kindness to get me a glass of wine, for your terrible words have quite unnerved me?"

Diego looked at the adventurer in astonishment. He had expected supplication for mercy.

"You do not fear?" he exclaimed.

"What should I fear?" Lope asked, calmly.

"That I may denounce you to the authorities."

"Yes, but you won't do that."

"Why not?"

"My young friend, I haven't lived in the world these forty years for nothing. You will not attempt to denounce me because you have only uttered these threats to frighten me. You think that this leaden casket is worth something to some one. You want a share in it. First you get a hold on me, then you will offer to be silent if I will pay for that silence by letting you share in my secret."

Diego looked dumbfounded. The Panther's guess was right.

"Well, suppose it is as you say, that does not alter our positions in the least," the Mexican cried, doggedly. "You are in my power. Give me a share in the secret of this leaden casket or I will speak."

"Again I say you will not," the adventurer said, blandly, not a trace of excitement in his voice and manner. "And there are two reasons why you will not speak. The first is, that at the slightest sign of treachery, I'd send you after your father to the devil. And the second, thanks to our gracious President, Santa Anna, I have been granted a full pardon for all lawless acts done in the wild heat of youth."

The innkeeper looked stupefied.

"And now, then, the name of the priest who holds the casket which contains only the title deeds to my estates, for I come of good blood, gentle Diego, though you may doubt it."

"Father Philip, the Mission priest," muttered the Mexican, sullenly.

"Thanks, and now stand from the door that I may pass."

Diego obeyed, and the Panther left the inn, a contemptuous smile on his dark face.

"He lies!" muttered the Mexican, fiercely. "Who knows what that casket contains? perhaps the clue to some Indian gold mine, hid in the mountains. I have it! I'll to Ponce de Bandera and tell him all."

Had the Panther known of the purpose of the Mexican he would not have smiled so cheerfully as he walked along.

CHAPTER XII.

WOODED, BUT NOT WON.

A YOUNG Mexican, a dashing, handsome fellow, dressed richly and glittering with golden ornaments, rode rapidly along the road leading from the town of Dhanis to the hacienda of Bandera.

He passed the "Panther" just after the adventurer quitted the drinking-shop.

The two men hardly glanced at each other. The rider was busy with thoughts of an interview to come; the other, with remembrances of one that was past.

These two men, apparently so widely separated, had yet an object in common; and that object, the lovely Mexican girl, Giralda.

The rider was Ferdinand Tordilla, the only scion of one of the oldest and wealthiest families in all Mexico; the possessor of an almost unbounded fortune. Young, handsome, skilled in all the manly exercises common to the frontier; rich in worldly goods, the gifts of fortune seemed showered upon him with a liberal hand, and yet he was not happy, for the heiress of Bandera smiled not upon him.

Little guessed the young Mexican as he rode by the swarthy stranger, whom he scarcely honored with a glance, that he passed a rival who would move both heaven and earth to win the peerless Mexican beauty.

Tordilla drew rein at the Bandera mansion and dismounted. On the threshold he was greeted by Ponce de Bandera in person.

"Welcome," said the father, advancing with outstretched hand.

"Well?" questioned the young man, anxiously, as he grasped the other by the hand.

"I fear that it is not well," Bandera replied, slowly.

"You have spoken to her then?"

"Yes."

"And her answer?"

"She does not love."

A moment Tordilla was silent, his eyes bent on the ground; then suddenly he spoke.

"Let me see her, senor; let me urge my suit in person. I shall not be satisfied until I hear her say 'no' with her own lips."

"And then?" There was a meaning smile on Bandera's stern face as he put the question.

"Even then I shall not despair; I have not lived long in the world, but yet long enough to know that a woman's mind is sometimes like the wind, changeable. I shall never despair until I see her at the altar a wedded wife."

"Right; it is a poor heart that dares not try to win. See her, urge your suit, and if she says no, come to me; then we will consult together what to do, for there is no man in Mexico whom I would rather call son-in-law than you."

A silent pressure of the hand spoke Tordilla's thanks.

"Enter, and I will send Giralda to you."

The two entered the hacienda.

Leaving the young man in the grand chamber, the father sought his daughter.

Brief was his speech.

"Ferdinand wishes to see you, Giralda."

The face of the girl betrayed no emotion at the announcement.

"I will go to him," she said, and with the word left the room.

Bandera's face grew dark.

"She is iron!" he muttered, "too like myself to yield a particle. She goes freely to tell him that she does not love him. What chance is there to bend her to my will?"

Thoughtfully the Mexican stroked his chin, his mind busy in reflection.

"Her brother—she loves him; loves him better than she does any thing else in the world, reckless vagabond though he be. Through him, I may work on her. I forgot! the American claims the first place in her heart. Two strings instead of one; once my hand gripes them, I'll wring her heart until she yields. I have lived too long to be baffled by the whims of a foolish girl. Danger lurks in the air around me; I walk among pitfalls. This adventurer means mischief. I doubt his power, for I think him but a bragging knave, but where there is smoke, there is sometimes fire. I parried the blow though before it was struck; that sounds like a contradiction, but it is a truth. I'll wait for Tordilla at the door. If I guess right the interview will not be a very long one."

Bandera proceeded to the portal and there waited for Tordilla's coming.

When Giralda entered the room where the young Mexican was seated, he sprung to his feet and advanced to greet her with a smiling face.

With a calm and smiling look Giralda returned his salutation.

"Senorita, may I speak frankly?" Tordilla said, lover-like, eager to know his fate.

"Do you not always speak so?" Giralda replied, her face as calm and her smile as soft as ever, yet she knew full well the import of the coming speech.

"Giralda, we have known each other since childhood: I have watched you grow from a child into a blooming woman. And in the years that have passed I have learned to love you. My position, Giralda, is of course well known to you; I am one of the largest landholders and richest men in all Mexico. My wife will not want for any thing that gold can purchase. All that I have shall be yours. I do not say this to influence your answer, for I am sure that a love as priceless as yours can not be bought with gold. When it is given, it will be given as freely as heaven gives the winds to the flowers. Giralda, may I not hope some day to call you mine?"

With downcast eyes the maiden listened to the impassioned speech. At length she raised her head and slowly made reply.

"Senor, to say that I am grateful for your offer would be but to speak the truth, but truth also compels me to utter painful words, perhaps, to you. I can not accept the love you offer. My ears hear your words, but my heart does not respond. You will pardon me, but in this matter I must speak frankly."

"You feel that you do not love me, then?" Tordilla asked, his face sad and a mournful tone in his voice.

"Yes," Giralda replied, softly but firmly. "I will not attempt to conceal from you that I have guessed from your manner that I had inspired you with a passion stronger than friendship, and I have striven by my conduct toward you, to let you see that I regarded you as a friend only."

"But this decision is not final; you may learn to love me yet?" Ferdinand exclaimed, eagerly.

"No, no! you must not think that way," Giralda said, quickly. "I am sure that I shall never think of you but as a friend."

"While I live, I can not help hoping," the young man replied, firmly.

"You wrong yourself, you wrong me by so doing. I am sure that I know my own mind, and I say that it can not be." The girl was embarrassed by the persistence of her suitor.

"When I see you married to another, then, and not till then, shall I despair," Tordilla answered.

"Senor, since I can not say aught else but what I have said, will you permit me to retire?" Giralda asked, coldly.

"Certainly; I would not restrain you even with a thought. I fear that you are offended, but I have spoken only the truth. I shall not cease to hope while a hope remains."

Silently Giralda left the apartment; her cold salutation would have chilled any heart but a lover's.

Snatching his hat from the table whither he had cast it, the young man left the room.

At the gateway leading to the road he met Bandera.

A single glance the old man cast into the face of the young one, but in that glance he read the truth.

"You have offered your love and been refused?" the father said.

"Yes," Tordilla answered, half in sorrow, half in anger.

"I expected as much—indeed, I felt sure of it. Can you guess why you were refused?"

"I have not thought of that. I have comprehended the result, not guessed at the cause."

"My daughter does not love you because she loves some one else."

The young man ground his teeth together, and an angry frown gathered upon his face.

"Good!" cried Bandera, as he noted the effect of his words. "That is the way you should look, for now you must think of vengeance."

"Vengeance!"

"Yes, upon the man who has robbed you of the treasure you seek—Giralda's love."

"And the man?"

"Can you not guess? Have you been blind?" cried the father, impatiently. "What man was it that danced with my daughter so constantly at the last fandango?"

"The North American—Gilbert, the Mustang!" Tordilla exclaimed.

"Right; he is your rival—a favored one, too. When the rock bars the passage of the mountain-torrent on its way to its grave, the ocean, the angry waters gather in their strength and sweep it aside."

"I understand; the Mustang must depart!"

"Yes, if he go not of his own-free will, he must be made to go." Bandera said, meaningly.

"Even now he is on a mission of danger. I have wagered with him that he can not insnare the wild horse whom the prairie men call 'The Lightning.'"

"But if he succeeds and returns, you will need aid. Walk with me a hundred yards, or so, and I will explain."

The two proceeded through the archway.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MYSTIC LIGHT.

Like two serpents entwined around each other, the Mustang and the Comanche chief contended for the mastery. To and fro over the prairie they struggled, locked together as with iron bands.

The savage essayed to draw the Mustang toward his band, while he, on the contrary, did his utmost to break the grip of steel with which the Comanche held him.

Crockett, the rifle to his shoulder, and his keen eye glancing along the brown barrel, groaned in anguish.

So quickly and irregularly did the two change places in their terrible struggle, that the hunter did not dare to fire at the Indian for fear of injuring his friend.

"Oh! give him the Kentucky hug—twist his heels off the airth and plug his head into it clean up to his shoulders, the derned brute!" cried the hunter.

On their part, the Indians did not dare to advance to the assistance of their chief, for fear of coming within range of the long rifles whose deadly power they had so recently witnessed; so, like statues, they sat on their ponies, and with breathless eagerness watched the thrilling struggle.

Breast 'gainst breast, muscle 'gainst muscle, strained together in tight embrace.

Every wily trick of the wrestler's art common on the border, the Mustang tried, but the savage chief was as supple as an eel and as strong as a panther.

Three times the Mustang got the "crook" upon the savage, and three times the wiry Indian slipped from the dangerous embrace.

In a bear-like hug the savage strove to crush the life out of the white. He clung to him as the serpent in the Indian forest winds around his prey.

So desperate was the struggle that the grass and flowers within the little circle where the struggling men swayed over the prairie were crushed and trampled as though a mighty buffalo had laid down therein.

The Mustang, iron-muscled though he was, felt that the Indian was fully his equal, if not his master. Vainly he tried to cast the chief from him; the Indian's grip was willow and steel combined.

The breath of the Mustang was coming thick and hard; the savage, too, was breathing heavy, but fresher than the white.

A last desperate effort the Mustang made. With a sudden twist he threw himself over backward to the earth, bearing the Indian with him, unable to resist and not guessing the trick; but before they reached the earth, with another twist, the white turned the Indian under and bore him to the ground, lending his own weight to increase the violence of the fall. The head of the Comanche struck the earth with a fearful shock. For a moment the concussion stunned him, and he released his grip.

The Mustang took advantage of this to free himself from the clutch of the Indian. He leaped to his feet and ran back to the clump of timber.

For a moment the Comanche chief lay motionless, then he rose slowly to his feet, his breast heaving with passion, and his eyes glaring with rage.

He ground his teeth together in anger as he looked toward the little clump of timber from where the brown rifle-barrels were gleaming, and then he turned slowly upon his heel and walked back to where his braves were scattered over the prairie.

"Why didn't you wipe out the heathen sarpint?" cried Crockett, as Gilbert, breathless, sunk within the cover of the timber.

"You forget I am weaponless," the Mustang replied slowly, recovering his wind.

"I'd 'a grinded him to death, the mud-colored son of a

per-aira snake!" cried Crockett, in indignation. "I kinder suspected a trick when the heathen come on. You ought to have let me plugged him once; he wouldn't have been of any use in this world arter."

"I did not suspect treachery; nor do I understand now why the savage should make such a desperate attack on me," Gilbert said, thoughtfully.

"It is the nature of these human wolves to seek blood!" cried a deep voice, close by the side of the little group.

The three turned in astonishment and beheld, just within the shelter of the stunted oaks, a tall and stoutly-built stranger clad in a curious garb composed of skins, and leaning on a huge, knotted club.

Amazement was written on the faces of the three.

"How in thunder did you get hyer, stranger?" quoth Crockett, in wonder; "did you drop from the clouds; or rise up like a spook out of the center of the airth?"

"I am not a ghost, but one of human mold, though would to Heaven that I was a spirit, for then I should find the rest that is denied me here, on this wicked, wicked earth!" There was a mournful cadence in the voice of the stranger that moved the hearts of his hearers with pity.

"Sho!" cried Crockett; "don't wish that you were dead, do you?"

"I wish for rest. In the grave there is rest, is there not?" demanded the strange being.

"Sartin; at least I s'pose so; don't exactly know, 'cos I hain't never tried it," the hunter said.

"Yes, there is rest there—peace for all; though their sins be as scarlet, His love will make them white as snow. Even yonder bloodthirsty demons, whose souls are stained with the blood of the helpless and the innocent, shall find rest there. Is it not a mercy then that Heaven has ordained that I should give them to their death, that I should live, a destroying angel, till the last red dog who bears the blood of the accursed Comanche nation within his veins has fallen by my hand and his bones whitened in the prairie breeze?"

Crockett and the Mustang exchanged glances. It was evident both had formed the opinion that they were conversing with a madman.

"How on airth did you get hyer without our knowing it?" questioned the hunter, puzzled. "I thought that my ears were as long as a mule's and could hear 'cording to size."

"Can you hear the cricket in the night when he crawls over the earth, till his shrill cry breaks on the still air? Can you hear the snake winding its stealthy path amid the prairie flowers, stealing on its prey? No! Neither can my approach be detected by mortal ears when Heaven wills that ~~the~~ ~~they~~ ~~should~~ be sealed to the sound of my footsteps. ~~By~~ ~~these~~ ~~the~~ ~~poor~~ ~~weak~~ ~~child~~, deadly peril surrounds you. When darkness comes, the red wolves will steal in upon you; they hunger for your blood; the smoke in their lodges curls upward, waiting to dry the reeking scalps torn from your heads. But the smoke curls in vain; you shall escape. I will save you!"

"You?" questioned the Mustang, in astonishment.

"Yes; do you doubt my power, rash young man? Look on me, and let my face live forever in your mind, and in the years to come, when children play around your knee and the young and happy wife sits by your side, affright their souls with my sad story. I am the Madman of the Plains."

Crockett, the iron-hearted borderer, drew back a pace from the strange being, the look upon his rugged features betraying plainly that a slight feeling of apprehension had taken possession of him.

"Heaven has sent me to save you," continued the strange being. "It is not written in the stars that you should die by the hands of these murdering dogs; neither shall you kill them; no hand but mine shall shed their blood. Do you wish proof that I am the destroying angel? You shall have it. With darkness comes my crown of fire, the locks of flame will play around my temples and lead me on to blood. Do not stir from this spot. An hour more and the red warriors will fly as the wolves fly before the prairie fire."

Then, with a sudden motion, the stranger sunk from the shelter of the timber into the tall grass that surrounded the prairie island and disappeared. But his progress could be traced by the wave-like motions of the grass as, serpent-like, he crawled through it.

"Wake snakes! but that's the most outrageous he-critter I ever *did* see!" Crockett exclaimed, in astonishment.

"His mind is evidently disordered," the Mustang said.

"Can we depend upon his assurance that he will save us from these red-skins?"

"I reckon you've got me in a tight place, as the coon said when the b'ar swallowed him," Crockett answered. "We'll see pretty soon, fur darkness is a-comin'."

The hunter spoke the truth, for the shadows of evening were falling fast on all around. Tree and bush first assumed strange shapes and then vanished, specter-like, in the gloom.

Little by little the night thickened. A great dark wall encompassed the little group.

The Americans unloosened the horses and prepared for flight.

Suddenly, Crockett grasped Gilbert violently by the arm.

"See!" he cried, in strange agitation, pointing to the north.

Afar off in the gloom of the night danced a mystic light; a strange blue flame that seemed half-way 'twixt heaven and earth. The teeth of the hunter fairly chattered.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MARVELOUS APPEARANCE.

THE Mustang could not repress an exclamation of awe as he gazed upon the mystic light. Despite his cool head and firm nerves he felt a cold shudder creep over him at the strange sight. He felt, too, that the hand of Crockett, which was laid upon his arm, was trembling like an aspen leaf.

"I reckon I'm shakin' wuss than any cuss a-fightin' old ague in the Ohio bottoms," the hunter said in a whisper. "What on airth is that? Is the devil loose for sure?"

"I can not account for it," Gilbert replied. "Never in all my life have I seen aught like it. Can it be reality, or is it but the work of our fevered imaginations?"

"Say, Gil, bite a piece out of my ear, or hit me a sock-dolager in the nose, 'cos I don't believe that I'm awake," said Crockett, seriously.

"It's no dream, but reality," said the girl, calmly. "Heaven has heard our prayers and sent deliverance to us from our terrible peril." She, weak girl as she was, did not share in the terror of the stout prairie men.

"I reckon the gal speaks the truth," Crockett said, in a whisper in the ear of the Mustang. "That mad cuss said that we should escape. Maybe he's got a hand in this hyer b'ilin'."

"Perhaps so," the Mustang replied.

With straining eyes the two men watched the mystic flame that floated so strangely in the air.

The night was dark and one could scarcely see a dozen paces beyond. The stillness of death reigned upon the prairie. It did not seem possible that the gloom hid human hands intent on bloody slaughter.

To return to the Comanche chief.

With a stately step he joined his braves, vaulted into the saddle, and wheeled the mustang so that he faced toward the clump of timber which formed the fortress of the whites.

"The white-skins are dogs—they fly before the angry red-men!" exclaimed the chief, in bitter contempt.

"The White Mustang is a great warrior, but the white horse chief is a snake that runs and does not fight," said Ah-hu-la, his lip curling in scorn.

"The knife of the Comanche shall drink his blood before two moons have come and gone!" cried the White Mustang, his bosom swelling with anger.

"The chief hates the white-skin?" the Little Dog asked.

"The Comanche has cause; the white horse-man seeks the Mexican singing-bird; but she shall never dwell in his wigwam," the White Mustang replied.

The Comanches now understood why their chief had made the wily attack upon the white.

"Will the chief ride once more against the long rifles?" asked Ah-hu-la, who burned to avenge the blood that had been shed.

"Yes, when night comes; then the Comanches shall steal upon their prey as the panther creeps upon the deer as it comes down to drink at the river, when the spirit-lights twinkle in the water. Let my braves prepare to ride in upon the white-skins."

"They may attempt to fly under cover of the darkness," one of the chiefs said.

"The panther bounds quickly—so will we," replied the White Mustang, tersely.

"It is good," said Ah-hu-la.

Then the braves prepared for the attack.

The gloom came stealing over earth and sky. When it deepened into inky night, the chief gave the signal for the advance.

Swiftly, but silently over the plain rode the red chiefs toward the prairie island which hid their destined prey.

Fifty yards of ground had the unshod hoofs of the Indian mustangs covered, when suddenly the strange blue light flared out in the air.

The chief who led the advance, the White Mustang, was the first to perceive it, and almost mechanically, he drew rein. The rest of the band followed his example and slackened their pace. The rapid trot changed into a walk.

"See!" cried the White Mustang, in wonder, pointing to the waving flame.

The light seemed to be about a mile distant and almost on a line with the little clump of timber which sheltered the whites, but some half a mile or so to the right of it.

The Indians gazed in wonder not unmixed with horror at the strange sight.

"Wah! it is strange!" said Ah-hu-la, a solemn expression upon his face.

"What can it be?" muttered the chief, in utter amazement, but on his face was no sign of fear.

"The totem of the Evil Spirit!" cried one of the Indians, in affright.

"More like a white-skin trick to frighten us from our prey!" exclaimed the White Mustang, in contempt. It was plain that he did not share in the fear that was rapidly taking possession of the breasts of his followers, at the sudden appearance of the strange blue flame.

"A trick!" said Ah-hu-la, knitting his brows in doubt.

"Why not?" questioned the White Mustang, quickly. Have not the white-skins made the powder which flashes a crimson flame and forces the leaden ball through the air? Why should they not make a blue flame as well?"

A grunt of assent from the savages told the chief that his words had weight.

"Why not?" said the Little Dog, slowly.

"Why should the Evil Spirit come to help the whites?" demanded the White Mustang, fiercely. "What have they done that they can call the spirits from the spirit-land to aid them? Nothing! It is a trick to frighten us away."

"What will the chief do?" asked Ah-hu-la.

"Take two warriors and ride yonder," and the Indian waved his hand defiantly toward where the blue flame danced in the air.

The Indians looked in each other's faces in doubt. It was plain that not one of them possessed the daring of the White Mustang.

"Wah! it is good," said Ah-hu-la, slowly.

"While the chief rides onward with two warriors, the rest will remain here. Who rides with the chief?"

For a moment there was silence; Ah-hu-la urged his mustang forward.

"Ah-hu-la is a great warrior," said the brave, slowly. "He will ride with the White Mustang even if he rides to the Spirit Land."

The example was not lost on the rest, for the Little Dog immediately took his place by the side of the other.

"The Little Dog is sick of the sky; he, too, will ride with his brothers—even to the Spirit Land."

A gleam of pride sparkled in the dark eyes of the Indian chief as he noted the devotion of his braves.

"It is good. Let the rest of my braves remain here. The Comanche chiefs will blow out the white-man's trick flame, and then ride in and hunt him from his hiding-place in the bushes."

Side by side, the three chiefs rode toward the mystic flame.

Fitfully it wavered on the air, now burning but dimly, and anon shooting a long, tongue-like flame up into the darkness of the night.

As the chiefs rode on they noticed that the strange light seemed advancing toward them. Steadily it came on.

The eyes of the mustangs caught sight of the flickering flame. They no longer felt the rein or the touch of the Indian heel. Snorting in affright, they gazed upon the strange sight. They came to a stand-still, and stubbornly refused to budge a single step onward; trembling in every limb with fear, they strove to retreat. With hand and foot the chiefs urged them on; the effort was fruitless, for fright had taken possession of every sense. The horses reared, pawed the ground, and strove to fly.

Even the iron hearts of the chiefs—nerved to ride to death—began to falter. The instinct of fear is catching; the beasts communicated it to the humans who bestrode them.

Then, suddenly as the flash of the lightning, the prairie was illuminated. A strange red light made all around as visible as by day.

A strange sight was there indeed for mortal eyes to gaze upon.

The prairie island with its growth of stunted timber; by it the two hunters, mounted for flight; the Mustang bearing the girl before him on the brown mare; in the center of the prairie the Comanches, picture-like, grouped together; a half-mile from them the three chiefs, vainly striving to restrain their frightened steeds, a half-mile further on, the Madman of the Plains, mounted on the sturdy charger; around his head, like a wreath of victory; played the blue flame, shooting upward from his disheveled locks into the air; in each outstretched hand he held a ball of fire, the flame from which lighted up the prairie.

His wild, discordant laugh rung out shrilly on the clear air of the night.

For a second only the Indians gazed upon the fearful sight, and then, with courage gone, they fled over the prairie with headlong speed. Even the White Mustang fled with the rest, and yet it was more the horse's will that bore him along than his own; for, desperate, he would have faced the spectral flames, and with his naked hands grappled with the fearful being who seemed a son of fire.

A minute more, and darkness again covered the prairie.

CHAPTER XV.

BANDERA'S PLAN.

BANDERA conducted the young Mexican along the road until they were fairly out of earshot of the hacienda.

The old Mexican glanced carefully around him, as if to assure himself that there were no listeners near. Apparently satisfied that no spy kept watch upon them, he spoke.

"I am satisfied that, in some strange way, this American adventurer has caught the fancy of Giralda. I confess I can not understand it, for I would as soon have thought that she would have fallen in love with a peon slave. But it is the truth, and as a truth we must prepare to meet it. Of course it is but a girlish fancy; the attachment has sprung up too suddenly to be aught else. Once the American is removed from her sight, she will soon forget him; but as long as he remains here, so that she has the chance of seeing him daily—and that we can not prevent—the fancy is likely to grow upon her, little by little, until it absorbs her whole life."

"Your plan, then, is to remove the American?"

"Yes."

"As I told you but a moment ago, he is now on an expedition of danger," Tordilla said. "I will frankly confess to you that I have noticed the intimacy existing between your daughter and this foreign scoundrel, and it has chafed me. Therefore I took occasion to banter the American about his skill as a mustanger—that is the occupation he follows, you know—and I dared him to attempt the capture of the wild horse whom the herdsmen call The Lightning."

"In hopes that the American would fail, and, discomfited by the failure, leave this part of the country?"

"Partly so, and partly in hopes that the wild horse might wound or kill him, as he has already done with so many of our best herdsmen who have attempted his capture."

"The chance is small; the American may succeed in capturing the horse, or, even if he fails, may escape unhurt. It will hardly do to trust to accident in a difficult case like this."

"What do you suggest?" asked the young man. "Shall I seize an early opportunity to fasten a quarrel upon him, and trust to the chances of a duel to remove this dangerous rival?"

"In a duel the chances are even," Bandera replied, shrewdly. "The Mustang is as likely to kill thee as thou to kill him. Besides, why should you give this ladrone a chance for his life? When you meet a snake on the prairie, you crush it at once with your heel. This man is a snake in your path; bruise his head then without giving him a chance to turn and sting you. This is my counsel; is it not good?"

"Yes, you are right; but what method shall I adopt to remove him?"

"That will require thought," Bandera said, slowly. "I do not suppose, from what I have seen of the fellow, that he can be frightened away easily."

"Oh, no!" cried Tordilla, quickly; "the brief conversation that I had with him in regard to the capture of the wild horse has convinced me that nothing can be made by the use of threats."

"As I thought; but I have a plan. You have heard of the three hunters known as the White Indians?"

"Yes; the outlaws who have a hiding-place somewhere along the Sego, above us here?"

Exactly," Bandera replied; "these three hunters, although not strictly beyond the pale of the law, are yet suspected of many a desperate deed. Report says that the prey they hunt is oftener men than deer."

"Yes, I have heard so."

"Now, my plan is this. If report speaks true, these men will not hesitate to perform any act of blood, provided that they are well paid for it. Now then, you must seek them out in their hiding-place near the Sego, describe to them the person of the American, and offer them a good round sum to induce him to leave this part of the country. No doubt they will gladly accept, and the probabilities are that the arguments they will use with him will be so powerful that he can not fail to see their force and will depart."

"And their arguments—what do you suppose they will be?" asked the young man, with a smile.

"An ounce ball, with a heavy charge of powder to back it up, or else a keen-edged hunting-knife and a stout arm to wield it," replied Bandera, significantly.

"Arguments such as those you mention seldom fail."

"They will not in this case, rest assured. Once get the White Indians to pledge their word that the American shall disappear, they'll keep their promise, though they have to dog him down to his death as the hunter tracks the deer."

"Where can I find these men who use such strong arguments?" Tordilla asked.

"They have a retreat near the bank of the river, some few miles above us here; a cave, I believe, where, like the wolves, they have found a lair. One of my herdsmen here is a trusty fellow; I'll dispatch him in search of these men—or perhaps you do not care to be known in the affair at all. In that case it can all be arranged through the herdsman."

"That will be the better course," Tordilla said, quickly.

"I confess I do not care to have any dealings with such fellows if I can avoid it. What will be the cost of this service—can you guess?"

"That will depend upon the humor of these rascals, but it will probably be high. The American is young, strong, a thorough prairie-man, and one not likely to be put out of the way without some trouble."

"I care very little for the price so that the result be attained," Tordilla said, carelessly. "Let their price be what it will, I am content to pay it, if they will but remove this dangerous rival from my path."

"If they undertake the task, they will accomplish it, never fear!" exclaimed Bandera, confidently.

"To-morrow at this same hour," replied Bandera, after thinking for a moment. "That will give me time to send the herdsman to these argumentative gentlemen and learn their terms for this service."

"Very well, to-morrow then at this hour I will return."

"Yes."

Then the two turned and retraced their steps to the house. Tordilla sprung into the saddle, waved his hand courteously to Bandera and galloped away.

"The American is doomed!" muttered Bandera, a look of satisfaction stealing over his dark features. "After I have placed the White Indians on his track he may say good-by to earth and prepare for another world."

As Bandera stood by the gateway buried in thought, the sound of footsteps approaching roused him from his reverie. Looking up he beheld Diego, the keeper of the little wine-shop.

Diego removed his sombrero and made a low bow as he drew near to Bandera. The old man gravely returned his salute.

"Senor, I am your humble servant," said the wine-seller.

"You wish to see me, senor?" Bandera asked.

"Yes, senor, I seek your counsel. You remember my father, Diego, who formerly kept the wine-shop now kept by me?"

"Yes, quite well."

"My father, as you are probably well aware, was not a rich man, yet he possessed a strange leaden casket curiously sealed."

"Well."

"Often, since I came to years of understanding, have I wondered what that strangely-fashioned casket could possibly contain. I knew that it was neither gold or silver, for it was quite light for its size. My father often jokingly said that it contained a secret which would some day make his fortune. A short time ago my father died."

"And you opened the casket?" asked Bandera, who, in reality, felt but little interest in the Mexican's story.

"No, senor!" cried Diego; "now comes the mystery. The leaden casket was not left to me with the wine-shop and the rest of my father's valuables, but given to the Mission priest, Father Philip, with strict injunctions to preserve it intact until a certain man called Lope, who was formerly a herdsman attached to the hacienda here, should return and claim it."

Bandera was all attention now, yet he strove to restrain his eagerness so as not to excite the suspicions of his informant.

"I suppose that it has never been claimed?" he said, carelessly.

"Oh, but it has!" cried Diego, in haste; "this very day, this man Lope presented himself at my house and asked for my father; learning that he was dead and that the casket was in the hands of the Mission priest, he has departed to claim it. Now, senor, if there be any valuable secret connected with this casket, I think I am entitled to a share of it."

"You are, most certainly; I will give the matter my personal attention and see that you are not wronged."

Diego departed in joy, leaving Bandera biting his lips in rage. He had guessed the secret that the casket contained.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WILY MOVEMENT.

In a small adobe cottage near the rustic chapel by the Sego, dwelt the good Father Philip, known far and wide as the Mission priest.

The sun was sinking slowly in the west, its last rich, warm rays bathing town, plain and river in a flood of golden light.

The Mission priest, a portly, jolly-looking father, short in stature, and with a face whose rosy hue told plainly of good living and of freedom from worldly cares, sat beneath the shadow of a clump of cactuses smoking a cigarette. His attitude—his face, betrayed that he was at peace with himself and all the world.

Calmly he sat and calmly he smoked.

A horseman dashing up at full gallop disturbed his peaceful meditations.

Looking up, the good father beheld Ponce de Bandera. With an exclamation of surprise the priest sprung to his feet, for like all the rest of the inhabitants of Dhanis, he had a high respect for stern Bandera.

Ponce dismounted, and casting the rein over his horse's neck, approached the priest.

"Good-even, father," he said.

"Peace be with you, my son," the monk replied.

"Father, I seek your assistance."

"You shall have it, worthy senor," replied the priest, in some little surprise, for he could not possibly imagine what the proud and wealthy Bandera could want of him. "Will you enter my humble abode?"

"I follow you, father."

The two entered the little cottage. The priest brought a stool for his visitor, then another for himself, and the two men sat down, face to face.

"Father, you are often intrusted with deathbed confidences?"

"Yes, my son," and the priest opened his eyes in astonishment at the strange beginning.

"Those made under the seal of the confessional are of course sacred, but those revealed to you as from man to man—" and Bandera paused.

"Sacred also, of course," said the priest, a peculiar twinkle in his little eyes: he began to have an idea that Bandera's

visit might be turned to good advantage. The monk was but human.

"Sacred, unless some one comes to you and presents a good and sufficient reason why you should speak."

"My son, the world does not belie you when it gives you credit for possessing great wisdom," the worthy father said, smilingly.

"To come to the point then, for I foresee that we shall understand each other without difficulty, you were present at the deathbed of Diego, the keeper of the wine-shop?"

The priest stared in the face of Bandera in astonishment.

"May the saints preserve us, but this is strange," he muttered. "Yes, you are right," he said, aloud, "I was present."

"And he intrusted a secret to your care?"

The monk again stared in the face of his visitor.

"Santa Maria! but this is wonderful!" he exclaimed.

"You are the second one to-day who has come to inquire in regard to the trust confided to me by old Diego."

A flush of rage swept over the haughty features of Bandera.

"Caramba, I am too late then!" he muttered between his teeth.

"Too late!" cried the monk, in astonishment, catching the muttered words that had fallen from the lips of his visitor.

"Will you tell me all that you know in regard to this affair? The secret that Diego intrusted to your care concerned a certain leaden casket, did it not?" Bandera said.

"Yes, senor."

"And you have parted with the casket?"

"Senor, I never had it," cried the monk.

"What? did not Diego before he died intrust the casket to you?" asked Bandera, in surprise.

"Not the casket, worthy son, only the secret of the casket."

"What it contained?"

"No, where it was hid."

"Ah! he had placed it in a place of concealment, then?"

"Exactly, and that is the secret that he intrusted to my care. When a certain person came to me I was to tell him where the casket was hid. This person, it seems, some years ago was obliged to leave this neighborhood suddenly, and not wishing to take the casket with him he gave it to Diego with a solemn injunction that he was to make provision for its safe disposal with me in case any thing happened to him."

"And the person who placed this casket in the hands of Diego was a man called Lope, who was formerly a herdsman on my estate?"

"Exactly; son, your knowledge is wonderful!" exclaimed the priest, lifting his fat hands in astonishment.

"And Lope the herdsman has come, satisfied you of his identity, and you have given him the clue by means of which he can possess himself of the casket?"

"Right again, worthy son."

"Of course you were paid for keeping this secret?"

"Certainly—five golden ounces; such was the bargain agreed upon by Diego and myself, and Lope satisfied the debt on the instant."

"Did you know this man?"

"Well, in former years. He has been much changed though by the lapse of time."

Bandera remained silent in thought for a few moments.

The priest watched him with a stolid face, but there was a peculiar twinkle in his shrewd little eyes.

"Is the spot where the casket is concealed far from here?" Bandera asked, at length.

"Not so very far, senor; say three hours' ride."

"Father, I have an idea that in some way this secret contained in the leaden casket is of importance to me. I would not attempt to bribe you, father, to do aught but what was strictly right for the world; but if you think that you do not violate a sacred confidence by telling me where this leaden casket is hid, I will bestow upon your chapel ten golden ounces, you to make such disposition of them as may seem fit."

The monk smiled blandly, and rubbed his soft, brown palms together caressingly.

"My son, you are ever generous. I do not see what is to prevent me from acting in this matter. I have kept the secret of the leaden casket securely locked in my own breast. The man Lope has come, received his secret and departed. I have kept my trust, the affair is ended. I think that I am free to tell you all that you may wish to know."

Silently, Bandera drew forth his leathern purse and counted

ten golden ounces into the fat monk's hand. The eyes of the Mission priest sparkled with delight.

"Ah, senor, would that all were as liberal as you," he murmured.

"Now, speak."

"You know where the Sabinal passes through the Gate to Hell and debouches upon the prairie?"

"Yes."

"Where the ruined mission-house stands by the river?"

"Yes," again said Bandera, eagerly.

"In the dry well, not ten paces from the ruined house, the casket is concealed."

"In the well?"

"Yes, two stones placed together at the bottom of the well, the casket placed between, and then another stone placed on the top."

"You are sure that there is no mistake?"

"None whatever; I took down the direction from Diego's own lips."

"A strange hiding-place," said Bandera, rising to depart.

"Yes; Diego was something of a hunter and given to wandering on the prairie. I can not guess, my son, what the casket contains, but neither gold or silver, of that I am sure, for I once held it in my hand and it was quite light."

"How long is it since this Lope was here?"

"Barely two hours, senor; you are close upon his heels."

"Do you think that he departed instantly in search of the casket?"

"I am sure that he did not," replied the priest, confidently. "He inquired concerning the locality where the old mission-house is situated. The spot has changed greatly since he was here some ten or fifteen years ago. Then it was the outpost of a line of smiling homes extending from Dhanis thither; but since that time the red heretics, the Comanches, have come with plume and brand and transformed the peaceful garden into a howling wilderness. Where once the mission bell summoned the peons to holy prayer, the howl of the coyote and the cry of the panther ring in the air. I told the stranger of the danger attending his quest, and he replied that he should procure arms. That of course will take time."

"Yes, father, perchance you have done me a great service; if you ever need a favor at my hands command me."

A minute more and Bandera was in the saddle riding onward with a fierce joy thrilling his heart.

"Oh, my daring friend, who robs the panther of his name, you shall be waited for at the old mission-house, and instead of a casket find a grave there!" Bandera cried.

CHAPTER XVII.

FATHER AND SON.

WITH a stern and sullen look upon his face, Bandera galloped onward. His thoughts were not pleasant ones, yet in them he had compassed the death of the daring adventurer who had so boldly challenged him to an encounter of wits.

"He shall die!" he muttered, between his firm-set teeth; "die the death of a dog. Let him tell his precious secret to the inhabitants of the other world; never on this earth shall he rob Giralda of the heritage of Bandera. I have stained my soul too deeply with crime to gain the prize to pause now at another deed of blood to retain what I have gained. There seems to be a hidden power in this life, which human mind never yet has fathomed, which forces men on despite themselves. I am sometimes tempted to believe that the oriental creed of fatalism is the true one after all; what is to be will be, despite our feeble efforts to shape affairs to suit ourselves. We are but puppets, and dance along moved by the wires of circumstance, and yet half the time we flatter ourselves that we are free creatures, and can either make or mar our fortunes."

The road along which the Mexican galloped was fringed here and there by heavy clumps of cactuses; for a while after leaving the mission-house, it ran straight as an arrow, and then curved suddenly to the west until it reached the bank of the river, that it followed into the town.

Bandera reached the bend in the road, and as he turned it, a slender stripling, rudely clad, rose suddenly from amid

a clump of cactuses, to avoid which the road had turned from its way.

The horse of Bandera, frightened at the sudden appearance of the stranger, shied violently; a less skillful rider than the Mexican would have been unseated by the unexpected motion; but the iron hand of the rider gripping the bridle, checked the horse, and the cruel bit—shaped, Mexican fashion, to break jaws of steel—caused him to halt so quickly, that in pain he reared up on his hind legs and beat the air wildly with his hoofs.

Bandera's face was as pale and white as if the stripling, who had so suddenly appeared, had been a spirit fresh from the shades below rather than one of human mold.

And yet there was nothing about the youth to excite wonder, much less apprehension, except that he had the face and air of a gentleman, and yet was habited like a laborer.

In person he was tall and slightly-built; his hair, jet-black in hue, curled in crispy ringlets around his head; his eyes were large, full, and of the same color as his hair. In features, the youth was strangely like the white-faced man who sat his horse like a statue and glared as though he beheld a ghost.

The proud eyes, the broad temple, the massive, square-set jaw of Bandera, all were reproduced in the face of the stripling; but the hard lines around the mouth and eyes which betrayed so plainly the iron will of the father, were wanting in the face of the son, for the youth, who had sprung like a specter from the bushes and stayed the horseman's progress, was indeed Bandera's boy.

"Good-evening, senor!" cried the youth, removing his greasy sombrero, and bowing with graceful politeness.

"Well?" questioned the father, speaking with a great effort, his face like iron.

"You mean, what do I want; exactly. I will explain," said the youth, coolly. "In the first place, don't glare at me as if I were the devil or one of his imps. Your eyes would turn some men into stone, but Luis Bandera has too much of the Bandera blood in his veins to be frightened by one of his own kin."

"Luis Bandera!" cried the father, scornfully, and with a little emphasis on the final word.

"Oh, I remember!" cried the stripling, lightly; "at our last interview you cast me off forever, and forbade me to ever again use your name. Father of mine, you forgot that your name is mine also. By bringing me into the world you gave me a right to your name, and I don't intend to be robbed of it. Luis Bandera I was, Luis Bandera I am, and Luis Bandera I will remain until fate calls me from this world and sends me to my master, the devil."

"You have disgraced me before all the world, liar, trickster and night-brawler!" cried the old man, hotly.

"You are so complimentary," sneered the youth, with perfect calmness. "True, I have drank; true, I have gambled; true, I have seen knives glitter beneath the moon; true, also, that I am a vagabond by nature. 'Tis in my blood, and that blood comes from you. Blame yourself then for the evil that is in me, not me for having it. I am but a passive agent, a chip floating on the surface of the stream at the mercy of every current."

"Do you remember my parting words?" cried the father, sternly.

"Oh, excellently well!" cried the youth, quickly. "I have a splendid memory. You told me never to let you see my face again, I remember."

"Why then do you cross my path? why will you not let me think that you are in the dishonored grave which you should have filled long ago?"

"I come to you because I want aid."

"And you expect aid from me?" Bandera exclaimed, frowningly.

"Yes, I do," the youth replied, quietly.

"You dream," the father said, coldly.

"No, I come to you to make a bargain. I don't want the aid for myself exactly, for thanks to nimble fingers and a clever head, by cards and dice I can get enough to keep me, for my wants are simple; but I have lost something; to find that something will cost a few golden ounces; more than I possess at present or have any chance of gaining. I make you a fine offer: lend me the money—I don't ask you to give it to me, because I hope some day to be able to pay you back—and I will agree that in the future I will keep out of your sight. You shall never know that such a person as myself exists in this world, as far as I am concerned. You have plenty, spare me a little; you'll never miss it."

"What is it that you have lost?" Bandera asked.

"A woman!"

The father's face fully betrayed the astonishment he felt.

"A woman!" he exclaimed, in wonder.

"Exactly! a woman who loves me and whom I love; a woman who would freely pour out her life's blood drop by drop to shield me, worthless vagabond that I am, from harm."

"And you say that you have lost her?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I can not tell; she has disappeared as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up; but give me the means and I'll find her if she is in the world; if she is not, I don't care how soon I get out of it."

"And if I do not choose to yield to this request of yours?" Bandera asked.

"I shall lie in wait here by the roadside and attack the first well-dressed man who rides to or from Dhanis," the youth said, seriously. "I am desperate; this girl that I speak of is the only being in this world that I have ever cared for. I don't exactly understand myself the feeling that is in my heart; I didn't dream how precious she was to me until she was taken from me."

"You will attack the first man, eh?" Bandera said, dryly.

"Yes."

"And the probabilities are that his pistol will blow out what few brains you have in that empty head of thine."

"That depends altogether whether he is quicker than I am," the youth replied, coolly.

"You promise me that if I accede to your request, I shall never again look upon your face?"

"I do."

"It is a bargain, then; how much do you require?"

"Twenty ounces."

"A large sum!"

"Yes; but think of what it will buy," said Luis, with a sneer on his face.

"Your absence; yes; well, to me it is worth more than twenty ounces," the father said, slowly.

"Send the money to the wine-shop of Diego. I will wait there for it."

"In an hour you may expect it."

"Thanks, senor; farewell."

Again the young man removed the greasy sombrero, bowed gracefully, and then proceeded toward Dhanis, humming the chorus of a merry drinking-song as he marched along.

With a frown on his dark features, Bandera sat motionless on his horse, and watched the youth until his form was hid from sight by the bushes that marked the turn of the road.

"Can this utterly worthless vagabond be indeed a son of mine?" the father muttered in sullen anger. "What a contrast to my peerless Giralda. Who can be the woman that he loves? Or is it but a pretext to wring some money from me? If he will keep his word, and never let me see his face again, I shall count the golden ounces well invested. Now for the White Indians. I shall need their aid. When the 'Panther' seeks the leaden casket in the old well, there must be witnesses by."

Slowly Bandera rode onward, plotting the death-snare of the adventurer.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE REFUGE OF THE OUTLAW.

A DARK and narrow passage cutting the mountain range, through it the waters of the Rio Sabinal plunging in mad glee. Pinyon and cactus growing thick by the river's bank; struggling for existence amid the rocks.

At the entrance to the dark passage, the prairie, covered with tall grass, garnished by thousands of brilliant-hued flowers, nodding their plumed heads playfully in the gentle breeze that swept ever over the surface of the broad plain.

The sun sinks in the west, a flood of light, crimson, purple and gold bathes prairie, wood and river. The shades of night are creeping slowly over the plain.

One living object alone visible on the broad prairie. A horseman riding furiously onward, heading toward the spot where the Rio Sabinal escapes from the close embrace of the wooded ravine, and sinks to rest on the bosom of the prairie.

The horseman is iron-willed Bandera.

Reaching the spot where wood, prairie, and river join, he dismounts from his horse, leads him within the shelter of the thicket, and pickets him there by his lariat.

Then, with a firm step, he strides onward, tracing the gurgling river up into the dark shadows of the ravine. Onward he goes without thought or hesitation, as though the way was as well known to him as the road that led from his own hacienda to the hamlet of Dhanis.

Rough the path, toilsome the ascent, the rocks slippery, wet by the spray rising from the river, where it poured its waters like an avalanche of silver against the jagged, beetling cliff-side.

For a good half-hour the Mexican followed the stream up into the ravine, the shadows of night growing darker and darker.

Suddenly Bandera halted, and cast a searching glance around him.

"This is the place, if I mistake not," he muttered.

Before him rose a tall cliff, its base hid by a dense growth of bushes; the Sabinal on the left washed the side of the cliff.

Bandera placed his fingers in his mouth, and imitated the cry of the nightingale.

Thrice the soft notes rung on the air; a moment of silence followed, then an answer came; the melancholy cry of the owl floated on the bosom of the air.

A smile of satisfaction appeared on Bandera's dark face.

"Good!" he muttered, "my quest will not be fruitless."

Hardly had the words left his lips, when from the rushes that fringed the base of the steep cliff, came a noise that plainly told that some living thing, human or beast, was making its way through the shrubbery.

Bandera remained motionless; the noise was evidently expected by him, for he did not seem in the least disturbed, and his hand grasped not a weapon.

The bushes parted, and a muscular, black-bearded man stepped into the little open space. He was habited strangely; Indian leggins of buck-skin; a frilled and ruffled shirt of the finest linen; a Mexican jacket, gay with golden trimmings, and fancifully adorned with knots of ribbon. His head was bare, the long, black hair, cropped across the forehead, Indian fashion, floating down around his neck and shoulders.

The silken sash, wrapped many times around his waist, supported a huge, broad-bladed knife, and four pistols, of different sizes and patterns, ranging from the cavalry weapon of the dragoon to the gilded toy of the town exquisite.

Such was Michael Dago, the hunter-brigand, known far and wide as the chief of the terrible band, who fancifully called themselves the "White Indians."

"Welcome, senor!" cried the outlaw in a loud, hoarse voice, as he emerged from the thicket, and beheld Bandera. It was evident from the manner of the brigand-chief that the wealthy Mexican was no stranger to him.

"I come again, you see," Bandera said.

"More need for strong arms and daring hearts, eh?" questioned Michael. "Well, I'm ready, be the work what it may."

"Are the others within the cave? for I require them instantly. What is to be done must be done at once."

"You are in luck, senor!" cried Michael, with a hoarse laugh. "The White Indians are all at home, and ready to receive visitors; and as for work, we are ready for action at a moment's notice. Point out the quarry, and we'll fly at it as the wolf flies at the wounded deer."

"Go on, I'll follow you," Bandera said.

Without another word the outlaw led the way into the thicket. Bandera followed in his footsteps.

The bushes pushed aside, revealed a well-beaten path with in, winding like a snake through the chaparral. It was plain that human foot oft had trodden it.

The path led through the thicket till it reached the cliff. In the side of the rock a dark hole revealed a cavity within.

The outlaws stooped and crawled through the hole. Bandera followed.

A few yards the two crept on in total darkness; then the passage turned abruptly to the right, and a cave, some thirty feet in diameter, stood revealed.

The cave was lit by huge candles, stuck in massive silver candlesticks, evidently wrested by the outlaws from some wealthy church.

Buffalo-skins, scattered around, served as couches. Upon the skins reclined two men. One, a tall, muscular man, about as red in hue as an Indian, was lazily smoking a ci-

garette; he was known as Red Jose. The other was a little, yellow-skinned Mexican, with eyes like black beads, and a cruel smile ever on his thin lips. He was called Pepe, and from his wily ways and cunning acts further called "the Snake."

These three men, Michael Dago, the giant, Red Jose, the half-breed, and Pepe, the snake, composed the band that had won such a dreadful name as the White Indians. No red prairie brave as merciless as they, no painted warrior as fierce, no Comanche or Apache chief as cruel.

The two outlaws reclining within the cave nodded a salutation to Bandera as he entered. The Mexican was well known to them.

"Now to business," said Michael, depositing his huge frame upon a buffalo skin, and motioning his visitor to a seat; "in what way can we serve you, senor?"

Bandera sat down upon the skin couch.

"Two services I desire at your hands," he said.

"Two, good!" cried the outlaw chief, while Pepe rubbed his hands together softly and smiled.

"For the first, do you know the old ruined mission-house by the river?"

"Yes; years ago the good father attempted to teach me how to read and write there, but I preferred the back of a mustang and a free gallop over the prairie to musty books," the outlaw said.

"By the mission-house is a well—"

"But dry as a desert under a hot sun," cried Pepe.

"Yes. Now, listen. There is a certain man in this world that I wish were out of it. He's a daring blade, an adventurer well used to handling weapons; one who will fight for his life as the tiger-mother fights for her young. This man has been tricked into the belief that at the bottom of the dry well the mission priests have buried a large store of gold."

"The mission priests bury gold, ha! ha!" and the outlaws roared at the idea. "Why, the poor devils had all they could do to live," continued Michael.

"When he seeks the well, which will probably be before morning, he must be waited for," Bandera said, significantly.

"Exactly; he seeks gold and must find steel!" the outlaw said, quietly.

"He must never leave the ruins of the mission-house alive."

"He shall not; what is he like?"

"A tall fellow, well-built, black hair and eyes, face browned, dressed roughly, long mustache," Bandera replied, in answer to Michael's question. "There is hardly a possibility of a mistake, for no one else is likely to seek that deserted spot. And now for the other service. There has late come to Dhanis two strangers—North Americans."

"The mustangers! I know them!" Michael said.

"One must die."

"Which?"

"The young man."

"It will be difficult to snare him," the outlaw said, thoughtfully; "he is young, strong; besides, he is seldom alone."

"I can arrange a trap for him also; he is in love; he will seek his love some night—"

"And we will lay in wait for him!"

"Yes; a sudden stroke in the dark and youth or strength are of little avail."

"These two services will cost money."

"How much?"

"Thirty ounces; that's ten apiece."

"It is a bargain," Bandera replied. "Away at once to the old mission-house; then come to me in the morning. Frame some excuse, that none may guess why you come to the hacienda."

And so the compact was made.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WARNING.

"DERNED if it ain't all like a dream!" said Crockett, in a whisper.

The Indians, the madman, the mystic light and the red ball of fire all had disappeared like a fleeting vision due to slumber's chain.

Had not the sound of the hoofs of the Indian mustangs still hovered on the air, the three could hardly have believed that the strange scene which they had just witnessed was indeed reality and not a disordered dream.

Fainter and fainter grew the sounds of the horses' hoofs. A moment more and the sound died away altogether.

"We are saved," said the girl, impressively.

"Yes, that mad critter said he'd pull us through, and blamed if he hain't done it. I never expected to see such a sight as this hyer. I don't wonder that the red devils thought that they were sent for. Wake snakes! how they did put across the per-a-rie; chain lightning wa'n't nowhar," Crockett cried, his naturally lively spirits returning to him.

"And now, senors, farewell; I shall never forget that you have saved me from a dreadful death; I shall pray that the day may come that I may repay the service," said the girl, earnestly.

"You will leave us, then?" Gilbert questioned.

"Yes, my pathway in life lies widely apart from yours, although, for the moment, fate has chosen to bring them together."

"Say, leetle gal, if 'tain't pryin' too much inter your affairs, which way mought you be going?" asked Crockett.

"To yonder town, Dhanis," replied the girl, pointing to the south.

"And you go alone on foot across the prairie?" Gilbert asked.

"Yes."

"And git gobbled up by these 'tarnal red niggers, sure as shootin'," growled Crockett.

"I do not fear," the girl replied.

"Yes, but we do. Sho! you've had a putty nigh shave of it already. It's temptin' Providence fur to risk your life ag'in. Why not go with us to the edge of the town an' then you can lite out whar you like?"

"My friend is right," said Gilbert; "and I trust, senorita, that you will not persist in your determination."

"Your will should be law to her whose life you have saved; I will do as you wish," replied the girl.

"Let's be travelin' then, for them 'tarnal critters might take it into their painted noddles to take the back-track an' look arter us."

"But the dead horse, The Lightning—" said Gilbert.

"What of the critter?"

"By right I should carry back some proof that I have won the wager and tamed The Lightning."

"Wake snakes! but you're right thar, every time!" cried Crockett. "S'pose you cut off the tail of the animile?"

"That will be proof enough."

"Keep in your saddle; I'll fix it for you in a brace of shakes."

Then Crockett slid from his horse's back to the ground, and his tall form dissappeared in the gloom that hung so densely over the surface of the prairie.

"You will not reveal to me, then, the name of the cruel wretch who sent you forth lashed to the back of the wild horse, to find a grave on the prairie?" Gilbert asked.

"I would rather not," the girl said, softly.

"You have no desire for vengeance?"

"A mightier power than is compassed by poor weak human nature will give me all the vengeance that I crave."

"But, if you should need friends you will not forget us?"

"Forget you!" and the girl's voice betrayed how intense was the feeling that swayed her heart. "No, never while I live; and each night in my prayer to the Virgin Mother, I will ask a blessing upon the heads of the two North American strangers who saved the poor Mexican girl from her terrible danger."

"You pray to the Virgin, then?" Gilbert asked.

"Yes; do you take me for a daughter of one of the wild Indian tribe because I wear a dress of deer-skin?"

"Such was my thought."

"You are wrong. The blood of two nations flows in my veins, but I am more Mexican than Indian. I wear the prairie garb because it suits my free life. I am fully as much at home upon the back of a mustang as on the ground. The story of my life is a strange one; I am a child of the prairie—like the tall grass and nodding flowers. No earthly parent has ever called me child; the fond caress, the loving mother's kiss, I never have known; I sprung like a weed from the yellow soil, for aught that I can tell."

The Mustanger had listened, deeply interested, to the mournful words of the girl.

"Poor girl! your story is a sad one," he said, and his heart warmed with sympathy for the orphaned maid whose slight form he held within his strong arms.

"Yes, and my life has been a sad one, too," the girl said, sorrowfully.

"And your name—how are you called?"

"Silver-spear."

"A strange name, and one after the Indian fashion."

"'Twas given me because the blanket in which I was wrapped when I was found hid amid the wild prairie-flowers was fastened with a silver pin fashioned like a spear."

"Shol hyer's a tail that kin a tale unfold," and Crockett's tall form once more stood by the side of the little gray Mustang. In his hand he carried the trophy of victory—the superb flowing tail of the black stallion.

With a bound the hunter leaped into the saddle.

"Let us onward, then," cried Gilbert.

Straight toward Dhanis they rode.

Few words the three exchanged on the way.

Three hours' ride and the hacienda of Bandera was reached.

"Halt, senor," said the maid softly. "Here we must part." And as Gilbert reined in his steed, the girl glided from his arms to the ground.

"Farewell, since it must be so," the Mustang cried; "but, remember, if you ever need friends, call upon the North Americans."

"I shall remember," the girl said quickly, and then, seizing the hand of the Mustang, she carried it to her lips and imprinted a warm, moist kiss upon it. A second more and her slight figure was lost in the gloom.

"Say, Gil, 'pears to me I heered the squeak of a leetle kiss! That ain't fair! Why didn't the she-critter pass it 'round?" and Crockett chuckled at the conceit.

"'Twas but a touch of her lips to my hand," Gilbert replied. "The poor child is very grateful for the service we have done her."

"Waal, I ain't no great shakes on wimin, anyway; but I'd a heap sight rather be hugged by that little gal than by an old she-b'ar."

"A very peculiar taste you have," Gilbert replied, laughing.

"Always *was* peculiar," Crockett replied, with a grin. "When I was a babby, no higher than a chaw-tobacco, I knew the difference atween sugar and vinegar afore any one told me."

The two rode onward.

Soon their horses' hoofs rung out on the broad plaza of Dhanis.

The Americans occupied a little adobe house in a narrow lane leading from the right of the square to the river. A small corral at the back of the house gave shelter to the horses.

Gilbert entered the house while Crockett took the horses into the corral.

Hardly had the Mustang crossed the threshold, and before he could close the door behind him, a dark form glided across the street, and entered the house close upon the heels of the American.

Gilbert turned in astonishment; he had heard the footfall, light as it was; nay, more—had detected the rustle of a woman's dress.

Why should a woman seek him at that hour of the night? Such was the question that the astonished Mustang put to himself.

The woman halted upon the doorstep.

Through the gloom, Gilbert could just make out that his strange visitor was a woman, closely wrapped in a dark cloak, evidently worn as a disguise. The hood of the mantle concealed her face. Two glorious dark eyes alone could he see.

"You are Gilbert, the Mustang?" the strange visitor asked, evidently trying to disguise her voice.

"Yes," Gilbert replied. He could have sworn that the voice was familiar to him.

"You are in danger."

"Who are you that tell me so?"

"Seek not to discover, but believe that I speak the truth."

Gilbert advanced and laid his hand upon the arm of the woman.

myself that you are really human. Your sudden appearance and the strange warning that has fallen from your lips would be apt to make one, if at all superstitious, think you a shadow from the other world, rather than mortal."

"Oh, believe me; I am but an humble friend, senor, who desires only your good," the disguised woman cried, earnestly.

"That I can readily believe, or you would not seek me in this strange manner, and at such an hour."

"Were my mission to you suspected, it would bring more harm to you. You have bold and powerful enemies, senor; men who will not hesitate to strike even at your life."

"That I guess readily; in fact, so sure am I of it, that I can boldly say I know that I have enemies and that they will not hesitate at any means to remove me from their path."

"You know that you are in danger and yet you do not fly?" the woman said, looking earnestly into the face of the Mustang.

"We of the far off northern clime are not used to fly at threats. Our blood is not as warm as the Mexican race, but our ice-rocked cradle does not chill us into cowards. I shall meet the danger that threatens me now as I have met the angry Comanche chief on the prairie, and the savage rock-king—the grizzly bear—by the snow-white peaks of the sierras, with an open front and a heart that fears not to give battle even unto the death. Think not that I speak boastfully, lady, for I count empty words as less than air, unless backed by deeds; but Gilbert, the Mustang, can say with truth that he never yet turned his back to friend or foe."

"I fully believe you, for even your enemies do not count you as one within whose veins runs the blood of a coward."

Again the voice sounded strangely familiar to the ears of the Mustang, but the gloom of the night was so dense that he could not have traced the lineaments of her face, even if it had been uncovered. The black eyes alone shone through the darkness.

"You know that you have enemies?" the woman said, after a slight pause.

"Yes."

"And you guess who they are?"

"Yes, again."

"You can name them?"

"For the third time, yes."

"Do so, and I may be able to tell you whether you guess the truth or not."

"Fair and softly, lady!" cried the Mustang, lightly. "You forget that you are a stranger who seek my confidence under the cover of night. How can I tell who you may be? The inhabitants of this fair and sunny land are noted for their cunning lures. May you not be an agent of these bold and powerful enemies of mine, seeking by a show of warning to win my confidence and so betray me to the men who seek my life?"

"Oh, senor, you can not think that!" exclaimed the woman, her voice choked by emotion, and her dark eyes filled with tears. For the first time, too, she spoke in her natural tones; in her anguish forgetting the necessity of disguising her identity.

The Mustang started in surprise. The wild suspicion that had taken possession of his mind as to who and what his strange visitor was, was truth; and the knowledge thrilled his heart with joy, and made the life-blood leap lightly in his veins.

"Think if any one should discover my presence here at this hour, what utter ruin it would be to me. Even now I shudder when I think of the terrible risk that I have run to warn you. You will never know who I am, but you must guess that there must be some powerful motive which has urged me to this wild and unwomanly step. That motive I speak frankly, it is to save your life. Do not ask why I should concern myself regarding you, a stranger to me; that is my secret and must remain so; only believe that I am a true and faithful friend to you."

"I do believe it, upon my soul," said the Mustang, earnestly.

"Listen then: you have two powerful enemies; first, Ponce de Bandera; second, Ferdinand Tordilla. Both think that you are an obstacle in their way; neither one will hesitate at any moment to remove you from it. Oh, if you could only know the pain it gives me to speak these words. To give you this warning I am compelled to betray one who has ever been kind and good to me."

CHAPTER XX.

THE MIDNIGHT MEETING.

THE cloaked woman started in alarm at the touch of the Mustang's hand.

"Do not fear, lady," Gilbert said, noticing her agitation.

"You have no cause for alarm. I only wished to assure

"I partly guess your secret, lady," the young man said, slowly.

The woman shuddered in alarm; her face was convulsed with anguish, but the friendly gloom concealed her agitation.

"Do not try to guess it," she cried quickly and in wild alarm. "I should perish with shame to be discovered by you. Never until now have I fully realized how wild, how desperate, how unwomanly is this act of mine. Oh! pledge me your honor that you will never attempt to discover who or what I am."

"Willingly; but, lady, I will not deceive you, who have risked so much for me; I know who you are."

"Oh, holy mother, save me!" cried the woman, wringing her hands, in anguish.

"Do not fear; never to mortal will I betray your secret," the Mustang cried, quickly.

"But, it is not that? What will you think of me? I have acted so unwomanly—like one utterly without shame," she moaned.

"What will I think of you?" questioned the American, repeating her words. "Why, that you are the best and bravest girl in all this great world, for you have dared for me as women only dare for those they love."

The arm of the Mustang was around the slight waist of the girl, and her head sunk unresistingly down upon his broad chest.

"I should never have dared to have told my passion; to have breathed the hope that I had dared to dream that I should one day win you for my own, bright, beautiful girl that you are. You are a flower more fitted to bloom in golden halls than to share the wild life of a poor adventurer such as I am."

"I love you, and to me you are a king," the girl murmured, softly, clinging tightly to the bosom of her lover.

"For your sake, I will try and be one," he said, passionately.

Then he bent down his head and touched the white forehead of the girl with his lips; her soft arms twined around his neck; then, lip to lip, and soul to soul, the Mustang claimed his bride!

What earthly joy like a pure woman's kiss.

"Sho! Wa-al, oh, git out!"

Crockett stood within the room, a lighted candle in his hand.

With a half-scream, Giralda—for it was the proud Mexican girl who had thus sought her lover beneath the cover of the night—hid her face in her lover's bosom. Gilbert held her tightly to his breast, trying to shield her from recognition.

The attempt was useless, for the keen eyes of the hunter had detected who the girl was that Gilbert held within his arms.

"Why on airth didn't you say somethin'?" cried Crockett, preparing to back out. "How in thunder could I tell? It's all right, senorita; don't you be skeered; I kin keep my mouth shet. I'm Gil's side-partner, an' tougher than an old he-b'ar."

Crockett backed into the inner room and the lovers were once more in the darkness and alone.

"Did your friend recognize me?" Giralda asked, earnestly.

"I think so, but be under no alarm; he is a true friend to me and would freely risk his life at any time in my behalf."

"But, Gilbert, do you not think that I have acted unwomanly in seeking you at such an hour?" Giralda murmured.

"Love and the circumstances excuse all," he replied.

"I did not know how else to warn you; I might have sent my maid, a peon girl, named Inez, but I feared that she might blunder, and so betray my secret."

"'Twas heaven's thought that sent you on this quest, for it has revealed to us the secret of our hearts. But you will let me see you again?" he asked, imploringly.

"Yes; I can trust Inez to bear a message; and now, *adios!*"

Again their lips met, and then Gilbert stood alone in the gloom.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE AMBUSH.

THE ruined mission-house by the Sego; the walls overgrown with wild, climbing vines, and the little court-yard filled with noxious weeds. Without the walls the prairie flowers grew thick, but within, the dark weeds had gained the mastery.

First, the native wilderness decked with the gay flowers, then the curbing hand of civilization with the grain and fruit destined for man's support, and then the dark and noxious weeds.

So ever in this life; man restraining free nature must needs leave some baneful influence behind.

A dozen paces from the ruined house, half-concealed by the tall grass that grew around it, was a well; visible evidence of the thoughtful care of the "good fathers," for often in the hot summer time the Sego ran sluggishly and the fever seeds of death lurked within the yellow waters.

Strong and massive was the stone coping that hemmed in the mouth of the well; the sides, too, were carefully banked with massive stones brought by patient peons' toil from the dark ravines of the Rio Sabinal.

But desolation's withering hand had been ruthlessly laid on the mission-well as on the mission-house. The stone curb was wanting here and there; the great stones, either laid by the side of the well on the prairie, covered from sight by the rank grass, or else had tumbled to the bottom.

The well, too, was dry now; dark-leaved plants, born half of earth, half of water, struggled for existence down in the gloom of the pit, hid from the sunlight, very outcasts from the rest of their world.

The sun was high in the heavens, and the morning breeze rustled the prairie flowers, when the White Indians rode down the bank of the Sego, approaching the ruined house from the north.

A good half-mile from the house they halted.

The band were all there, mounted on wiry mustangs, Michael Dago, the chief of the three, Jose, the red-skinned half-breed, and Pepe, the Mexican snake.

"Now the question is, has our game come or not?" said Dago.

"That is easily found out!" cried Pepe, quickly. "He will come on horseback, and as he comes from Dhanis will approach from the south. From here we have a clear view of the river for two miles, at least, southward. I will scout into the ruins. I can easily discover whether any one has been there or not by the presence or absence of horse's hoofs. If he has not come, let us picket the horses in that clump of timber"—and the speaker pointed to a little prairie island some half-mile inland from the river—"and then conceal ourselves in the tall grass by the ruins. When he descends into the well, we can easily finish him."

"Good!" cried Dago; "Pepe has the gift of speech, and makes up by length of tongue what he lacks in strength of hands."

Pepe grinned at the compliment.

"But dismount and examine whether our prey has come or not, and Jose and myself will take the horses to the timber."

Pepe dismounted and proceeded on his mission, while the other two rode onward to the prairie island, leading Pepe's horse with them.

As the little Mexican approached near to the ruined mission-house, he proceeded with the caution of the red chief stealing in upon a sleeping foe.

A wide circle he made to the south around the ruins, and then came again to the river.

Closely and carefully he examined every foot of ground that he passed over, but the search was in vain; the morning dew was still fresh upon the flowers, and no mustang's hoof had trampled the waving grass to the ground.

"Caramba!" cried Pepe, in glee; "no living thing has trod this way since daybreak, I am sure. We are in time, then, and shall earn our ounces easily."

When the Mexican made this remark he had little idea what an opponent he and his brothers were destined to find in Lope, the panther.

Pepe, returning with the same caution that he came, joined the other two.

They had left the horses concealed in the timber, and found an ambush in the tall grass just beyond the ruins.

Lying down at full length upon the earth, the three were concealed from sight by the tall prairie grass.

"Well?" questioned Dago, as Pepe rejoined them.

"No sign of beast or man," replied the other.

"He has not come, then; good, we are in time," the leader of the outlaws said, in a tone of great satisfaction.

"How shall we proceed? spring upon him the moment he dismounts?" asked Jose.

"And stand a chance of getting a bullet through the body?" growled Dago. "Caramba, no! Did you not hear what the senor said? This man is used to arms, and will sell his life dearly if we give him a chance."

"Better wait until he descends into the well, then dispatch him," Pepe suggested.

"That's the plan; no risk; that's what I like," Dago said, complacently.

"Suppose he should discover our presence here by some accident, and fly without dismounting?" Jose asked.

"That is not likely," Dago replied. "We are to the north of the well," while he comes from Dhanis from the south. He will ride straight up the bank of the river; there is no other way. Unless he has the scent of the deer, he will never discover us, ambushed here like snakes in the grass."

"Besides, why should he expect that any one should lie in wait for him?" Pepe observed, shrewdly. "I was careful to leave no tracks behind me when I crept in toward the well. The precautions I took would baffle the eye of a Comanche."

"Oh, there's no doubt that the job will be an easy one!" Dago cried. "Look well to the priming of your pistols. When he descends into the well, we'll creep toward it, and rain such a shower of bullets down upon his head, that he'll think the day of judgment has come with leaden hail."

"Hush!" cried Pepe, suddenly, bending his ear close to the earth.

"Well?"

"I hear the sound of a horse's hoofs."

The three listened intently.

The quick ears of the Snake had not deceived their master.

A horse was approaching at a round gallop.

"It must be our man!" cried Dago, in the ears of the others.

Carefully the three examined their weapons, lying motionless as logs upon the ground.

The sound of the hoofs came nearer and nearer.

Pepe lifted his head and peered cautiously through the waving grass.

The sound of the hoofs' strokes countering upon the virgin soil of the prairie, had ceased. The rider had evidently halted.

Pepe, watching from the ambush, saw an iron-gray mustang, surmounted by a tall and muscular rider, standing by the side of the mission-well.

"Carefully the rider gazed around him. North, south, east and west went the gaze of his searching eyes. No wily savage, watching for the trace of an ambushed foe, could scan the prairie more carefully.

Pepe caught but a glimpse of the horseman, and then, fearing discovery, crouched again to earth.

"What is he doing?" asked Dago, in a whisper.

"He has halted by the side of the well and is looking around, as if he feared that some one was watching him," the Snake replied.

"He fears lest some one should be near to dispute the hidden gold of the mission-priest with him," muttered the chief of the outlaws, with a smothered chuckle.

"The old well is more apt to prove his grave than his treasure-house," Jose growled, hoarsely.

"Right, comrade, and we'll be the mourners," Dago said, with a grin on his coarse features.

"And his heirs too; only the ladrone looks as if he hadn't two copper-pieces to chink together," Pepe remarked.

"Look again, Pepe, and see what he is doing," Dago said.

The Snake obeyed the order.

Cautiously he lifted up his head and peered through the green blades.

The mustang still stood by the side of the well, but the horseman had disappeared.

"Pepe communicated the intelligence to his comrades.

"He has descended into the well, then," Dago said.

"It is probable," replied the Snake.

"The time for action has come; vamos!"

The three rose from their ambush, and, pistol in hand, stole in toward the well.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PANTHER'S TEETH.

WITH the cautious tread of tigers the three advanced.

The gray mustang, hopped in the Mexican fashion with the lariat attached to the fore-legs, was lazily cropping the grass by the side of the well.

As the three men approached, the horse raised his head and looked at them; the ears laid backward and the outstretched muzzle showed that the beast was alarmed; and little wonder, for the mustang was of the southern provinces by the sea, and was not used to seeing humans habited in the wild garb of the frontier.

The outlaws noted the attitude of the horse and halted.

"Curse the beast!" growled Dago; "he seems to suspect that we intend no good to his master."

"He is evidently frightened at our approach, if he moves away, the sound may warn our man in the well," Pepe said.

"Let it!" cried Dago, hoarsely; "we'll shoot the ladrone down as he rises from the well."

Again the three advanced.

The horse, alarmed by their approach, hobbled off over the prairie.

The three came within twenty paces of the well.

Suddenly the head of the adventurer appeared above the stone coping; he had evidently been alarmed by the sound of the horse hobbling away, but, ere the White Indians could draw "bead" on the head of their victim, he disappeared from view.

Again the three halted.

"Caramba!" muttered Dago; "the beans are in the fire now; the ladrone has seen us."

"He may not suspect that we mean harm to him," suggested Jose.

"From the description that the senor gave of him, it is plain he is no fool," Pepe observed. "He has seen us advancing with pistols in our hands; besides, here on the prairie each stranger is a foe. The only question now is, how to get at him?"

"We'll stand on the brink and fire down into the well, one at a time, so that we can be ready for him if he attempts to ascend," Dago said.

"Let us try to draw his fire first," Pepe observed, shrewdly.

"Good!" Dago exclaimed.

The three surrounded the well.

A few minutes they stood motionless and listened. No sound came from within the well; all was as still as death.

Cautiously Pepe advanced to the brink. He knelt beside the coping. Removing the sombrero from his head with his left hand, he pushed it cautiously over the edge of the pit; in his right hand he held a pistol ready cocked.

Hardly had the edge of the sombrero fairly appeared to the eyes of the adventurer, crouching like a wild beast at the bottom of the well, when, crack! the bullet of his pistol pierced the edge of the crown. Had the head of the owner been within the hat, he would never have had need of head-covering more.

With a laugh at the success of his ruse, Pepe thrust the muzzle of the pistol over the edge of the well; but he had reckoned "without his host," for, ere he could pull the trigger, a second bullet from the adventurer shattered the pistol-stock and sent the Mexican, with a broken finger, howling, backward from the well.

With a yell of rage, Dago and Jose rushed to the coping and fired down into the pit.

Two more bullets from the beleaguered man answered the attack.

Dago retreated, the tip of his right ear gone, swearing horribly, while Jose's cheek bore visible evidence of the skill of the adventurer as a marksman, a bullet having plowed its way through it, producing, however, only a slight flesh wound.

"The unhung devil!" growled Dago, in a passion, feeling for the tip of his ear; "he has marked me for life. He must be well armed; four shots has he fired in rapid succession."

"Caramba, the scoundrel has broken one of my fingers!" exclaimed the little Mexican, looking mournfully at his bleeding hand.

"And he has cut my cheek to the bone," Jose muttered, ruefully.

"We are idiots!" cried Dago, suddenly; "we have given him time to recharge his weapons."

"How could we help it?" muttered Pepe. "The ladrone has the advantage. He can see us before we can see him."

"How shall we draw this snake from his hole?" asked Dago, somewhat perplexed at the turn matters had taken.

"It is not so easy a job, after all, said Jose, still tracing with his fingers the ragged cut in his cheek.

"By the Virgin, we'll sit down by the well, and starve him to death, if we can think of no other way," Dago said, savagely.

The crack of a pistol, followed by a howl from the little Mexican, interrupted the discussion.

The adventurer had taken advantage of the lull in the attack to climb to the top of the well, take deliberate aim at one of his assailants, and fire. And, had it not been for the fact that the position of the Panther, clinging like a wild-cat to the stones that framed in the wall, was a ticklish one, rendering a steady aim almost impossible, it is extremely probable that the account of the little Mexican, with this lower world, would have been forever closed.

The attack of the Panther was carrying the war into Africa with a vengeance.

"The demon has put a ball through the fleshy part of my arm!" Pepe cried, fairly dancing up and down with rage.

"Caramba! We must kill him, or he'll kill us," muttered Dago, by no means pleased with the way that his scheme was progressing. "Jose, you keep watch upon the well; put a bullet through his head if he again pops it above the coping."

The bandits had recharged their pistols during the above conversation.

"Never fear, I'll settle him if he shows as much as an eyebrow," exclaimed Jose, savagely. The hot sting of the bullet cutting its way across his cheek was yet fresh in his memory.

"Now, Pepe, cudgel thy brains; how can we kill this devil?" asked Dago.

Thoughtfully the Mexican looked around him; prairie, river, sky, all he scanned; his brows compressed in thought; he was seeking allies, not living but inanimate ones. His eyes rested at last upon the stone coping of the well; that coping, that in its gaps here and there, showed the marks of time's destroying hand.

The face of the Mexican lighted up. He had found the allies that he sought.

"Voto!" he cried, in triumph; "I have it!"

"The plan to kill yonder beggar?" asked Dago, anxiously.

"Yes; you see that a stone here and there is wanting? Let us push the rest of the stones into the well on top of this demon!"

"Good! he will be crushed to death!" cried the chief of the outlaws in fierce glee.

"It is easily done. See, the stones on this side are all loose," and Pepe pointed to the coping.

With fierce joy written on their savage features, the three proceeded to their task.

Shoulder to shoulder the White Indians knelt by the stone wall.

A single mighty effort they made; the small stones that filled up the crevices between the large ones went down in a cloud of dust into the well. A moment the massive boulders trembled on the edge, and then they, too, fell into the chasm.

A stifled groan came from the bottom of the well. The outlaws listened with savage joy. They doubted not that it was the death-knell of the man who had so bravely fought them single-handed.

Boulder after boulder the three poured into the well. They were determined that their victim should have no chance of escape. The well was to be alike his place of execution and his grave.

Dago looked down into the pit. Beneath the stones he could discern a dark, motionless form.

The golden ounces were won!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE STRANGER.

THE morning sun was pouring its bright beams full upon the prairie, drying the dew-drops that hung like liquid pearls on the bladed grass and on the gay-colored flowers.

Afar off on the prairie, close to where the Sego silver ribboned the green wilderness, rode the proud and beautiful Mexican girl, Giralda."

She was mounted on a cream-colored mustang of rare beauty, that loped along with a motion as easy as that of a Yankee rocking-chair.

Behind her, three miles to the south, the hacienda of Bandera loomed up against the sky. Surrounded by a circle of green, the mansion seemed like an outpost of civilization, and so in truth it was, for the town of Dhanis was two miles further south.

Giralda had allowed the reins to fall listlessly upon the arching neck of the mustang, and the beast took its way where it pleased.

Giralda's eyes were bent thoughtfully upon the ground; she heeded not which way the mustang galloped; north or south, east or west, it was all one to her.

The scarlet lips trembled apart; a single word escaped from them—a name—"Gilbert!"

The dainty beauty was day-dreaming of her lover.

'Twas but the night before that he had held her in his arms and pressed such kisses upon her lips as she ne'er had felt before; caresses that told her how happy she would be were she his forever and forever.

How sweet is the strange, incomprehensible passion that men call love, when youth's warm and joyous blood is leaping lightly in our veins!

Each little incident of the momentous interview of the preceding night, each loving word, each fond caress, was fresh now in the young girl's mind.

The pace of the mustang slackened into a walk; he missed the accustomed pressure of his mistress' hand upon the rein.

Still mused Giralda, deep in the abstraction of her own thoughts.

The sound of a horse's hoofs suddenly roused the maiden from her day-dream.

Raising her eyes, she beheld a horseman approaching from the north. He was quite near to her. The soft surface of the prairie had deadened the sound of his mustang's hoofs.

The new-comer was a young and handsome fellow—a half-breed, apparently, to judge from his color, his coal-black hair and eyes. He was dressed roughly, after the fashion of a herdsman, and bestrode a sorry-looking mustang, which in color resembled the tawny prairie soil beneath its feet.

The stranger raised his hat with true Mexican courtesy as he approached, and then brought his horse to a standstill.

Giralda's steed had halted of its own accord upon the approach of the stranger.

"Good-morning, senorita," said the half-breed, speaking in a deep and not unmusical voice, which seemed strangely familiar to Giralda's ears, although at the moment she could not remember where or when she had heard it before.

"Good-morning, senor," Giralda replied, returning his salutation, her dark eyes fixed in wonder upon the face of the stranger; for upon looking at the man, the impression came upon her that she had seen him before, or, if not him, some one to whom he bore a most striking resemblance.

"Is yonder hacienda Bandera's?" the stranger asked, pointing to the south to where the circle of green nestled by the bank of the river.

"Yes, senor," Giralda replied, her eyes still gazing intently upon the face of the horseman.

The longer she looked the more familiar his face grew; and yet she was almost sure that she had never seen him before. She could not understand the singular interest which the stranger excited in her breast.

"Senorita, if I am not wrong, you are the daughter of Senor Bandera?"

"Yes, senor," Giralda replied.

"Will I find the senor at home this morning?"

With a simple inclination of the head, Giralda made answer.

"Pardon the question, but will the senorita ride further north?" the stranger asked.

"Such is my intention."

"You had best not; the Comanches are abroad, and report says that they are on the war-path."

"I have little fear; my horse is swift, but I will heed your warning, senor, and thank you for it."

The stranger spurred up his horse and wended his way south, taking leave of Giralda with a profound bow.

The Mexican girl gazed after him with knitted brow. Vainly she questioned why the face and voice of the horseman should excite such a strange interest in her breast.

Suddenly a thought flashed across her mind.

"It is my father that he resembles!" she cried, in wonder.

And she spoke the truth; the stranger, although a half-breed—half-Indian, half-Mexican—bore a most decided likeness to Ponce de Bandera.

"It is very strange," Giralda muttered, as she urged the mustang into a gentle gallop; but gradually the thoughts excited by the stranger's face and voice faded from her mind, and in their place came again the dream of love.

Anticipation is sometimes almost as sweet as reality.

As Giralda rode up the river, the horseman rode down, heading directly for Bandera's hacienda.

"How beautiful she is!" the horseman muttered, as he rode onward, "and how like she is to some one that I have seen before! Her face carries me back to my childhood's days. I do not understand it." And the horseman's forehead was wrinkled by the lines of thought.

At the gate of the hacienda the stranger halted. A group of herdsmen were gathered before the door, preparing for the prairie.

"Is Senor Bandera at home?" asked the horseman of the herdsmen, removing his hat in salutation.

"Yonder comes the senor," one of the men replied.

And almost with the word, Bandera stepped from the portal.

"Health be with you, senor," said the stranger, dismounting from his horse and bowing lowly; "do you want a herdsman on your estate?"

The voice of the stranger affected the father as it had affected the daughter.

Bandera gazed earnestly in the face of the applicant; the expression upon his countenance was one of profound astonishment.

"A herdsman?" he said, mechanically.

"Yes, senor; I can ride like the wind, and throw a lasso with any man from here to the Gulf," replied the horseman, confidently.

"What is your name?" asked Bandera, suddenly.

"I can't tell you that very well."

"No?" asked Bandera, in astonishment.

"Not the name which really belongs to me. I was found on the prairie when an infant, and know not who or what my parents were, but the people who brought me up called me Juan," the stranger said.

Bandera had listened attentively, and his cold, keen eyes were fixed intently on the face of the horseman.

"I think I can find something for you to do," Bandera said, slowly. "Go, send Pedro to me," he continued, turning to one of the herdsmen. The man departed.

"You are about twenty-two years old?" Bandera said, again addressing the stranger.

"Yes," he replied.

"And you never knew your parents?"

"Never, senor!"

"It is strange," Bandera muttered, half to himself and half aloud.

Pedro, who has chief of the herdsmen, came through the gate.

"This young man wishes employment as a herdsman," Bandera said; "arrange with him as to pay. I think that he will suit me."

Then Bandera re-entered the hacienda, evidently deep in thought.

It did not take long for Pedro and the stranger to come to terms; so, within ten minutes, the horseman, Juan, was formally engaged as a herdsman on the estate of Bandera.

After settling terms with the new-comer, Pedro sauntered back to the portal and leaned carelessly against the gate.

A peculiar expression was on his face as he watched the stranger, who had fallen into a conversation with some of the herdsmen.

One of the men, an old weather-beaten Mexican, approached Pedro and noticed that he was watching the new man.

"Voto! you have seen it also, eh?" he said.

"Seen what?" asked Pedro, affecting astonishment.

"The wonderful likeness that this fellow bears to the senor."

"He is like him," Pedro said, slowly.

"Did the senor have a first wife who was an Indian girl?" the herdsman asked with a meaning laugh.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BEWARE!

THE warm summer sun was sinking slowly in the west. The little plaza of Dhanis was full of life. The heat of the torrid sun gone; the inhabitants had sallied forth from their dark adobe walls, and in little groups conversed together, enjoying the balmy breeze, laden with the perfume of the prairie flowers, which blew ever from the north.

The gay uniforms of the Mexican troops—for Dhanis boasted a garrison, composed of a single company, some fifty men in all—made brilliant the little groups of sober habited citizens.

The gay senoritas listened archly to the compliments of the dashing sons of Mars.

The staid and solid men discussed the prospects of trade and the victories of commerce.

All was peace and rest.

The golden sunlight bathed the little town with its mellow beams.

Then, suddenly, into the little square bounded a sturdy charger, bearing on its back a strange and uncouth rider, clad in a garb of skins.

With wonder in their eyes, citizen and soldier, parent and child, gazed alike upon the strange and incomprehensible man.

The rider was he, who, in his wild way, declared himself to be The-Sword-of-Gideon, the Avenger of the Lord.

It was the Madman of the Plains.

In the center of the little square the Madman halted. He reined in his horse so violently as to almost throw the beast backward upon his haunches.

Wildly he waved his arms in the air.

"Oh, men of Dhanis, awake!" he cried, in tones which pealed forth like a trumpet's blast; "death knocks at your doors; heed his warning ye must, or die the death which all must die when the last hour comes. The steel is bright; soon it will be red—weep crimson tears; the blood of the innocent—of the virgin maid, the tender child, the aged father, the weeping mother, will stain the blade of the red prairie wolf. Rouse ye from your sloth! Gird on your armor for the fight! The Comanche is abroad; the red braves are on the war-path, and soon they will sweep down upon Dhanis; their arrows will darken the sun; like the whirlwind they come bearing death and desolation with them!"

The faces of the listeners whitened as they heard the terrible warning.

The fond mother clasped her child tighter to her breast; the maiden clung to her lover in fear, while the strong men of war grasped their sabers and glared around them as if they expected to see the painted and moccasined Comanche warriors spring upon them, even from the earth.

Don Estevan, captain of the Fourth regiment of the line, and commandant of the Presidios of Dhanis, was the first to recover from the general stupor produced by the thrilling announcement of the Madman.

The commandant drew near to the strange being.

"Pardon the question, senor," he said; "but from whom did you gain your information that the red chiefs contemplated an attack upon our town?"

"From the Lord of battles!" cried the Madman, in reply, a wild glare in his eyes.

Despite his firm nerves and well-tryed courage, the Mexican officer retreated a step. There was something unnatural—unearthly about the stranger.

"From the Lord of battles?" asked the Mexican, in wonder.

"Yea!" cried the Madman, in a strange frenzy. "Listen! As I lay sleeping upon my rocky bed within the canyon center, I heard a strange sound unlike the roar of the river where it plunges down the gloomy rocks forming the cataract; unlike the hoot of the night-birds—my sentinels from coming danger, or the howl of the gray wolf who treads the prairie and keeps watch and ward for me. Then the light broke in upon my eyes and I saw clearly; like the prophet in the wilderness I saw the vision of the future. The darkness of the canyon was lighted up by the fires of heaven, and the thunder-peal, the artillery of the Lord, rolled across the sky. I was lifted from my dark bed and borne on the bosom of the blast through the curtain of the night. I saw the red demons arming for the fight. A thousand warriors follow the lead of the White Mustang, and they ride for Dhanis. They leave behind them a river of blood; the scalp-locks

hide their deer-skin robes. The flames of the burning houses frighten the stars from the skies. Prepare, oh, men of Dhanis, for blood and slaughter cometh even on the wings of the night!"

"How soon may we expect the attack?" asked the commandant, anxiously; he gave full credence to the words of the strange being; there was something in his manner that forbade doubt.

"When the clouds gather in the sky, beware of the coming storm!" replied the maniac. "The lightning strikes not without warning. The Mexican moon will soon rise; ere its hours fill, the lance of the Comanche will be reddened with Mexican blood."

"Can you tell the point of the attack?" questioned Don Estevan.

"Let your eye sweep to the north," said the strange being, bending over in his saddle and whispering in the ear of the officer. "Follow the winding Sego amid the prairie flowers; what building with its stern outline breaks the line of the sky?"

"Bandera!" exclaimed the officer.

"Ere the Mexican moon wanes, the ruins of Bandera will tell a fearful story of man's wrong and of Heaven's justice!" cried the Madman, in a deep whisper in the ear of the Mexican. "'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,' but oftentimes he strikes with human instruments. In the rocky barranca the pinion tree stands alone, a giant in its strength; a single blast, and it is hurled prostrate to the earth. Bandera is proud, Bandera is wealthy; but, man of iron though he be, let him beware the vengeance of the King of all kings! A line of triple steel could not guard him now. When Bandera's hacienda is in ruins—when Dhanis is level with the prairie, remember my words! Oh, son of man, prepare for death!"

With his arms raised wildly in the air, the Madman delivered the charge; then wheeling his horse around, he galloped off as suddenly as he had come.

Many a long breath came from anxious lips at his departure. The spell of terror was broken.

A hundred tongues wagged in busy conversation.

The single name of the famed Comanche chief, the White Mustang, was equal to a hundred red warriors in influencing fear. Few in the little square doubted the truth of the Madman's warning, and soon the note of preparation rung on the air. The sword felt the edge of the grindstone; the flint of the musket was renewed; the lead run into bullets, and the two brass pieces, mounted *en barbette* on the wall of the little fort, were carefully swabbed out, and the conical piles of balls placed by their sides told plainly of war's stern alarms.

The two Americans, Vance and Crockett, had been attracted from their house by the wild tones of the Madman and had overheard the warning of the Indian attack.

After the abrupt departure of the Madman, they had slowly returned to their quarters.

"I reckon thar's lively times ahead, as the raccoon said when the b'ar swallowed him," Crockett remarked, quietly.

"Do you believe that there is any truth in the words of this remarkable man?" asked the Mustang, thoughtfully.

"I reckon so," Crockett replied, confidently; "the critter knows what he's 'bout."

A shade passed over Gilbert's brow. He was thinking of the danger that threatened his beloved.

"If I thought that there was really danger of an Indian attack, I'd—" and the Mustang paused suddenly.

"You'd what, eh?" asked Crockett, shrewdly. "Go fur the leetle piece of calico?"

"I would risk my own life to rescue her from danger!" Gilbert cried, quickly.

"Sartin! b'lieve you would fur sure!" and Crockett chuckled at his companion's enthusiasm. "Now, ef you'll take my advice, you'll take that leetle gal an' put fur home, soon, ef not sooner."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LETTER AND THE PLOT.

THE two walked on a few rods in silence. The Mustang was meditating on the words of his companion.

"But will she go with me?" he asked, suddenly. "How can I ask this girl to forsake home, friends, all, for me, an utter stranger? The thought is madness."

"Do you think that the old Don would give you the gal ef you went up as bold as a sheep an' asked fur her?"

"No; I am almost certain that he would not. At the last fandango there was a something in his eyes which revealed to me that he was not pleased with the attention I was paying to the girl."

"Nat'rall! You're neither kith nor kin to these Greasers. He looks upor you as a sort of devil, 'cept hoofs an' tail. It's kinder rough to ask a gal to quit, pull up stake an' travel without the consent of the old man, but it's human natur' fur the she-critters to do it. I reckon ef I loved a gal an' hank-ered arter her like a hungry b'ar fur a persimmon-tree, that I'd be mighty apt to take her ef she'd vamose the ranch with me."

"I will speak to Giralda and ascertain what her feelings are in regard to the matter," Gilbert said.

The two then entered the house.

Hardly had they sat down within the room, when a low knock sounded on the door.

"Jerusalem!" cried Crockett, in a whisper; "that sounds like a feminine's knuckles. I wonder ef thar ain't some Greaser gal struck arter me?" and Crockett grinned comically at the Mustang, rising at the same time and opening the door.

A peon girl, with the ever-common serape wrapped around her, stood on the threshold. From the serape a pair of merry black eyes peeped out.

"The senor Vance?" the girl said, hesitatingly.

"Walk right in, marm!" exclaimed Crockett, throwing the door wide open as he spoke. "Thar's the man."

The girl looked at Crockett as she entered the room, then at the Mustang, and hesitated.

Crockett guessed at once from the girl's manner that she wished to speak to Gilbert alone.

"Git out, eh?" he said, in a tone of question. "Reckon I will! I allers take a hint quicker'n lightning," and Crockett backed out into the corral at the rear of the house, closing the door after him.

The girl drew a note from the folds of the serape and extended it to Gilbert.

The young man guessed at once from whom the missive came.

The note was brief and traced in a woman's delicate hand. It read as follows.

"I will be by the river, north of my father's hacienda, at nine to-night. Come if you love me."

The signature was wanting, but the Mustang guessed the cause.

"My mistress did not dare to sign it for fear that my errand to you might be suspected, and in case it was found on me I was to say that I had written it to Diego, the keeper of the wine-shop. The writing is mine, senor, but my mistress dictated the words."

"It was a wise precaution," Gilbert said. "North of the hacienda?"

"Yes, senor; there is a group of three cactuses growing together close to the river's bank, just where the stream bends to the west. If the senor will make a circle on the prairie and avoid the hacienda as he comes up the river, he will not be apt to be seen."

"I shall remember; tell your mistress that I will most surely come."

The girl smiled, went to the door, opened it, but paused on the threshold.

"Will the other senor come too?" she asked, innocently.

Gilbert could not forbear a half-smile at the question.

"Yes," he replied.

"He can keep watch while you talk to my mistress," she said, with a cunning glance of the eyes, and then closed the door behind her.

"Come in, Crockett!" Gilbert exclaimed.

The hunter re-entered the room.

Gilbert told of the appointment to meet the fair Mexican girl, and requested Crockett's company, never hinting of the significant speech of the pretty waiting-maid.

Crockett readily acceded, not dreaming of the trap which the Mustang had set for him.

A mile or so to the north of the hacienda of Bandera, two men rode side by side along the river's bank, deeply engaged in conversation.

One was Ponce de Bandera in person, the other, the chief of the White Indians, Michael Dago.

"And you finished him, then?" Bandera questioned.

Dago had just joined him, and the iron-willed Mexican spoke of the reckless adventurer who called himself Lope, the Panther.

"Yes; and a perfect demon he was, too," the bandit replied. "I thought we should have an easy job in dispatching him when he once got down into the well, but I soon discovered that he could hit us better firing up, than we could hit him, firing down."

"But at last you finished him?" Bandera questioned, impatiently.

"Yes, we toppled the stones down upon his head, killed, buried and raised a monument to him all at the same time," and the ruffian chuckled, ferociously.

"I have another task ready for you."

"I hope no more such jobs as this last one," Dago said. "The demon shot away the tip of my ear almost at the first fire. I haven't seen death so near for many a long day; an inch or two the other way and I should have had no more use 'or golden ounces."

"This is easier. It is to put the American out of the way."

"Oh, yes, I remember. How can we get at him, and when?"

"To-night."

"So soon?"

"Yes; the Mustang has made an appointment to-night. The place of meeting I do not know, but I can easily discover it."

"How?"

"By tracking the person whom the American goes to meet."

"A woman in the case, eh?"

"Yes."

"They always play the devil with us men," said the bandit, coarsely.

"A message was sent to the American to-day. A poor girl of my household bore it. I suspected her errand, happening to see her leave the hacienda and take the road leading to Dhanis. I saw that there was a chance to entrap this North American without the trouble of providing a lure, so I sent one of the men that I could trust—not to follow the girl, for she is a quick-witted wench, and would have detected the watch at once—but to tell a certain lover of the girl, one Diego, who keeps the wine-shop, that his flame had gone to Dhanis to seek a rival. This put him at once on the scent. He followed the girl and tracked her to the house of the American in the village, then back again to the hacienda. Thus I discovered what I wish to learn. I will have a close watch kept upon the person whom he comes to meet. You with others will lie in wait. When the American returns to Dhanis, attack and rid me of him."

"Why not attack him during the interview?"

"No, no!" cried Bandera, quickly; "the night promises to be a dark one; you might in the gloom injure one whose life is more precious to me than even my own." Rather than a single hair of her head should be harmed I would see the Mustang escape."

"You're right; a bullet has no respect for a person, and knows no difference between friend or foe."

"The night will soon be here," Bandera said, with a glance upward at the murky sky above; the sun had sunk beneath the line of the horizon. "You know the herdsman's cottage twenty rods or so above the hacienda on the right?"

"Yes."

"Find shelter there with your men, till the time for action comes. I will give you due notice."

"Depend upon me!" Dago replied.

The two parted, the bandit going to the north, Bandera to the south.

The coming gloom seemed like a mantle to hide a dark and bloody deed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RENDEZVOUS.

OVER the prairie, circling to the north of the hacienda of Bandera, rode Gilbert, the Mustang, and the border lion, Davy Crockett.

The crescent-shaped moon was high in the heavens, the hour of nine at hand, and the prairie silent as the Mission grave.

The horsemen gained the road that ran by the side of the Sego.

The glimmering light of the moon danced in a thousand ripples on the bosom of the sluggish tide.

A half-mile to the south the walls of the hacienda of the Mexican loomed up a black mass against the sky.

By a little clump of cactuses, close to the river's bank, the two Americans drew rein.

"We had better not approach too near to the house, else our presence may be discovered by some of the dogs," Gilbert said.

"An' the darned curs hate a white man wuss than a Digger Injun does clear water. They'd yelp like all-possessed ef they got a smell on us," Crockett remarked.

"Will you remain here and see to the horses, while I scout in to the house?"

"Sartin—in course I will, ef you think it best."

"Yes, I do," Gilbert replied. "Even if I am discovered by any of the inmates of the house, your presence would not aid me, for the only course to pursue in such a case would be to retreat at once."

"That's correct, sure as shootin'! An' ef we did leave the brutes, some cussed yaller-belly might stampede 'em; then we'd be in a nice fix. I reckon, though, that any 'Greaser' would stand a right peart chance of gittin' the hull top of his head-piece kicked off ef he come within reach of Jerusalem's heels."

"I'll go on at once, for it must be near nine."

"Co-rect; never keep a gal waitin'; it worries the leetle dears, an' riles their dispositions wuss than a 'norther' does a puddle of dirty water."

The Mustang dismounted.

"I shall not be gone long," and with this parting speech Gilbert stole away into the darkness.

"I reckon when a feller is a-talkin' with the gal he bankers arter, that time slips away 'bout as lively as a scart 'coon goes up a holler tree," muttered Crockett, as he watched the gloom gather and thicken around the manly form of the Mustang.

Then Crockett carefully surveyed the ground around him. On one side, the river; on the other, the open prairie; before him, the hacienda of Bandera, surrounded by clumps of timber; in his rear, the open plain, stretching afar off to the giant hills where melted the snow that fed the Sego's stream.

"Feel kinder jubersome—kinder like an old tom-cat, with a big bull-dog arter him," Crockett soliloquized. "Reckon thar ain't any danger, but jest as lief I wa'n't hyar. Don't like night, any way; only fit for coyotes and nigger babies. I reckon I've got a touch of ague, 'cos thar's a cold chill dancin' a Virginia reel down my back bone."

Crockett shivered, yet the breeze, borne along on the bosom of the night, was balmy and mild, laden with the sweet odors of the flowery prairie.

With a sudden movement Crockett dismounted. On the ground he shook himself together, as he would have expressed it; then he stepped forward, and rubbed his cheek against the nose of the mustang, who switched his tail around in delight at the caress.

"Sohol you big-souled, long-eared son of a streak of greased lightning!" exclaimed the borderer, patting the neck of the horse, kindly. "You ain't handsome to look at, but I reckon that handsome is as handsome does. You don't smell any thing wrong, do you?" And, as if in answer to the question, the mustang stuck his head down, and pretended to bite the hand that held its rein.

"No yaller Greaser nor painted Injun sarpint crawlin' round, hey? I reckon I'd trust your nose ag'in' my eyes, every time."

Then, to the astonishment of the woodman, the mustang suddenly raised his head, laid back his ears, and stuck his nose out straight in the air.

"Danger, by hookey!" Crockett muttered, loosing the pistol in his belt; the long rifle was slung across his back.

The mustang shook his head, tossed his mane, and betrayed other signs of uneasiness.

"Injuns!" muttered Crockett, gazing around, anxiously. "The leetle cuss never made a mistake yit, an' he says Injuns now, jist as plain as kin be. What on yearth brings 'em in so near to the settlement? 'Tain't the Mexican moon yit, either. I reckon I'm in a fix, hyar, as the b'ar said when he poked his nose into a beehive."

Then the sound of a light footfall came to the startled ears of Crockett. Quickly he thrust the pistol back into his belt. The keen ears of the woodman had told him that there was but one approaching.

"I reckon that I kin knife this critter without his howling much, ef I have to do it," he muttered.

The broad-bladed hunting-knife was gripped in the muscular hand of the Indian-fighter; great danger for the coming foe, for the great black bear of the Tennessee cane-brake had gone down writhing in death at a single blow of the glistening steel.

Then, through the gloom of the night, came a shadowy form, stealing forward with the craft and caution of the wild-cat.

Crockett, crouching beneath the shadow of the cactuses, nerved himself for the coming encounter.

Gilbert proceeded onward with noiseless steps. Swiftly he glided forward. More and more distinct the walls of the hacienda rose before him.

At last the Mustang paused and glanced around him cautiously.

"I must be near the appointed place," he muttered.

Then as he stood deliberating, from the shadow of a clump of trees, a dark-robed figure advanced toward him.

A second more and Giralda was in his arms.

What joys like those of pure, true love?

Beneath the shelter of the thorny branches the lovers sought concealment.

"Have you waited long for me?" Gilbert asked.

"No, only a few moments. I feared you might mistake the place."

"Love gave eyes to pierce even this darkness," the Mustang replied, fondly caressing the soft locks of the Mexican maid.

"Oh, Gilbert, I have acted so boldly with you. If you could see my face, you would see how the blood flushes my cheeks with shame. I can not understand what has made me pursue such an unmaidenly course. I never did any thing like it before in all my life. I am so afraid that you will think badly of me."

"Think badly of you, dear, true-hearted girl that you are; if I should live to a hundred years, in all that time I should never find hours enough to bless the act which told me that my love was not a hopeless passion."

"You make me so happy!" and the glad tears of joy flooded the great, black eyes of the girl as she nestled her head down on the breast of her lover; the darkness concealed her agitation. The haughty Mexican girl, cold as a marble statue, stately as a pinyon tree, possessing the strange reserve that kept all at a distance and forbade near approach, was now melted by the influence of the master-passion, as tender as the rosebud, and as full of fire as the glowing coal.

Strange change! Who shall deny the power of love?

"And you have made me so happy!" the Mustang exclaimed, pressing a low, soft kiss upon the pure, white forehead.

"You love me?" she murmured, lowly.

"Yes," he answered, tenderly pressing the rounded form still closer to him.

For a moment there was silence; then Giralda suddenly raised her head and rested it on the shoulder of the Mustang.

"Do you think that I am pretty?" she asked in a shy, soft voice.

"Yes, very pretty!" he answered.

Softly she pressed her cheek against the bronzed face of Gilbert.

"I am so glad that you think so," she murmured, gladly. "I do not care what any one else thinks, but I do want you to think that I am pretty."

"Giralda, sometimes I fear that I shall never be able to win you; you alone favor my love," Gilbert said, earnestly.

"You have won that love; for your sake I will give up home, friends, all, and follow you through the world."

With a long, sweet kiss Giralda sealed her pledge.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SURPRISE.

BANDERA sat alone in his chamber. The long white candles burning in the massive golden candlesticks cast a wavy, uncertain light throughout the room.

The Mexican was seated in an arm-chair by the center-table, facing the lighted candles. His hand was toying nervously with his silken beard, and the deep wrinkles, that told of busy thought, lined his massive brow.

"It must be near nine," he muttered, communing with himself, for the owner of the hacienda was alone. "In a few minutes more my second blow will take effect. The path seems clear before me, excepting one obstacle only. Strange, how curious are the ways of fate. No sooner do I sweep one menacing hand aside than a second springs from the air and threatens a blow. This adventurer, who would have foreseen that he would appear? no one! Yet he does come; he threatens, and again I strike. Again my path is clear, when, as if by magic, or called up by some devil from the shades below, this herdsman steps forward, and again I see the up-raised hand ready to strike. Will peace never come? Must all my life be spent in committing new crimes to hide the traces of the old one? Bandera is mine. One blow gained it, but it has taken two to retain it; and now I see the necessity for a third."

The old Mexican started from his chair and paced up and down the room, strangely excited.

"Mexico is wide!" he muttered, as he walked restlessly to and fro. "What demon prompted this herdsman to come here, or is it my good genius that has sent him, so that I may have the chance to crush the only creature who can dispute my right to these broad prairies? Another blow! and so I said before. When the first thought came into my mind that I might seize the estate, I said, 'a single blow and all is mine.' The blow was struck, success crowned the effort; years go by, and then, suddenly, fate puts a fresh opponent into the field. Another blow, another success; then days—not years, or even weeks—and another comes; I sweep him aside, and in his place there comes a third. What says the fable of the ancient hydra? no sooner is one head destroyed, than in its place springs another."

Fiercely the Mexican shut his white teeth together, and with knitted brow walked up and down.

A low tap at the door interrupted his meditation. In obedience to his command a herdsman entered the room; a wily-looking little Mexican, with a glimmer of low cunning in his dark eyes.

The herdsman was one of Bandera's trustiest men, and had received instructions that night to watch the footsteps of Giralda.

"The senorita has gone out," the herdsman said.

"Yes."

"She has taken the road leading up the river."

Bandera looked astonished; he had counted upon Giralda proceeding toward Dhanis.

"Perhaps after a while she may proceed in some other direction," the old Mexican said, slowly.

"It is not likely, senor, for I followed her until she reached a clump of cactuses about half a mile from here, by the river's bank, and there she waited."

Bandera saw at once that instant action must be taken, else the American would escape the snare which had been laid for him, for the Mexican doubted not that Giralda had stolen forth to meet her lover.

The father was quick to act.

"You have done well," he said, slowly; "you are sure that she did not discover that she was watched?"

"Yes, senor," the herdsman replied, quickly; "a snake could not have glided over the ground more noiseless than I."

"Remember my caution; do not mention this matter to any one."

"I shall remember; the senor can depend upon me," and with a low bow the herdsman withdrew.

Bandera seized his sombrero and cast his serape over his shoulder.

"Dago and his men are ambushed below the hacienda, cursed luck! The American dog may escape us, after all!"

Then Bandera seized a pair of pistols that were on the center-table, together with a broad-bladed knife. The weapons he thrust into his girdle, and left the room.

He proceeded straight to the open air.

Outside the gate the Mexican halted and cast a glance upward at the sky. A smile of satisfaction spread over his gloomy face as he noted the darkness of the night.

"The very night for our purpose," he muttered. "If that foolish girl will only hold him in soft dalliance for a half-hour or so, I would not give a golden ounce for the American's chance to escape with life. Now for my men. They can not be far from here."

With rapid strides Bandera hastened down the road which followed the winding course of the Segó.

Ten minutes' walk and he halted; before him was a little clump of timber, the scrubby trees looking like so many weird specters, standing with outstretched arms and flowing robes, in the gloom.

"The very spot that Dago would select for an ambush, or I mistake my man," Bandera said, as he peered forward into the darkness.

Then he imitated the low cry of the nightingale.

Hardly had the quivering note died on the air when an answer came from the clump of timber.

"They are here!" Bandera exclaimed, and he at once proceeded onward.

As soon as he entered the shadowy gloom which wrapped the timber with a somber mantle, Michael Dago rose from his concealment in the bushes.

"It is I—Bandera," the Mexican said.

"Yes, I guessed as much when I heard the signal," the outlaw replied. "No sign of our game yet; there doesn't seem to be even a mouse stirring."

"The beggar has been too sharp for us; he has fixed the place of meeting above the hacienda instead of below it."

"I see; and by circling around the prairie, got at it."

"Yes."

"He has escaped us, then?" Dago cried, in disgust.

"No, no!" Bandera replied; "I do not think that he has come yet. One of my fellows tracked the person that the American comes to meet to a little clump of cactuses about half a mile above the hacienda, but saw nothing of the mustanger."

"We can probably get a chance at him, then?"

"I think so; but you must advance at once."

"Yes, Jose! Pepe!"

At the call, the half-breed and the Mexican rose from their ambush in the bushes.

"We're all ready, you see."

"Yes; come at once; I will accompany you as far as the hacienda," Bandera said.

The four set out, Bandera and Dago side by side, while the other two followed in the rear.

"Scout in as near as possible," Bandera said, in the ear of the ruffian, "but do not attack him until the girl departs. I would not have a hair of her head harmed for all the gold in Mexico."

"All right; I'll send Pepe ahead; he has eyes like a cat, and can see in the dark about as well as in the light."

A few minutes more and the party reached the mansion of the Mexican.

"A half-mile or so beyond," Bandera said.

"Trust us," Dago replied; "we'll do this piece of work as nicely as the other, when we buried that fighting devil in the well. *Vamos!*"

The three ruffians disappeared in the darkness. Bandera remained motionless at the gate of the hacienda for a few moments. A grim smile was on his thin lips and a demon light shone in his dark eyes.

"Devil of an American!" he muttered, shaking his clenched hand menacingly at the gloom, "you have won the love of my girl, but ere you win her in person you shall feel my hate. But one deed of violence after this, and I am done with blood forever!"

And so Bandera had cried before.

"Another crime—the last—and I am done!"

How many times in this world has weak, foolish man cried thus, and how many times the pledge so freely taken has been as freely broken!

Bandera re-entered the mansion. Some few of the servants were gathered in a group within the inner court-yard, listening to a wild Indian legend told by an aged herdsman. The story was hushed for a moment as Bandera passed by them, for they were always awed by his stern and moody way.

The old Mexican went at once to his apartment. He opened the door and entered the room.

A cry of astonishment escaped from his lips.

Seated by the center-table, with the candle-light beaming full on his features, was Lope, the Panther!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STRAIGHT FROM HADES.

BANDERA could hardly believe his eyes; but a second glance told him that 'twas no vision, but the adventurer, alive and well.

A beaming smile was on the face of Lope, and a peculiar light twinkled in his bold, black eyes.

It was plain that he enjoyed the astonishment that his presence had caused.

"Good-evening, senor!" he exclaimed, with easy politeness, and a gracious smile upon his features; "I trust that the health of my honored friend is as good as when last we met and held sweet converse together. You can not guess how much I should be pained to hear of your illness. I should be in as much despair as a gold-digger when he discovers that his 'placer' had run out and that the supply of auriferous metal has come to an untimely end."

Bandera guessed at once that by some lucky stroke of fortune the adventurer had escaped from the trap which had been sprung upon him.

The first thought of the Mexican was to spring at the intruder and stab him upon the spot; mechanically his hand clutched the handle of his knife, but the quick eyes of the Panther saw the movement and instinctively guessed the thought in the brain of the other.

With a slight, careless movement of his arm, the Panther shook aside the ragged serape, which hung from his shoulder and covered his left hand, which rested upon his knee.

The hand gripped a pistol, the hammer was drawn back, exposing the flint ready for action.

"Check to the king!" cried the Panther, with a shrill laugh of triumph.

Bandera's eyes were blazing lightnings, but the adventurer quailed not. Few men could bear down the bold, glittering orbs of the Panther.

Bandera removed his hand from the handle of his knife and folded his arms calmly, although the fiery pangs of baffled hate were raging within his breast.

"Do you understand what check to the king means?" questioned the adventurer, with a sneer upon his face; "do you ever play chess? It's a wonderful game. When the king is in check he must either get himself out of his dangerous position, or else interpose some other piece. You sent your knights; I have swept them aside, and again you are in danger; what can save you? One thing only; lose the queen—the peerless Giralda! I hope that I have made myself sufficiently intelligible."

"Yes," Bandera said, slowly. Rage was burning in his heart, and his busy brain fairly ached as vainly he tried to devise some scheme to baffle the adventurer.

"I see by your face that you are somewhat surprised to behold me here. I came without ceremony. Ceremony is so awkward—so cold and formal between men like you and I—between men who understand each other so well, for I think that you are about the greatest scoundrel in this world excepting myself, and I've no doubt that you think the same. I know that you would like to see me dead, and nothing in the world would give me greater pleasure than to see you dangling at the end of a long rope in mid-air. You must allow that I am candid if not complimentary."

"Exceedingly so," replied Bandera, dryly.

"It is my nature—open and free-hearted—always ready to take half of any one else's property without words. And now that I think of it, let me give you a word of advice; don't attempt my life again, because you are only wasting money."

"Perhaps you are wrong," Bandera said, quietly, but the crust of ice concealed a center of fire.

"Perhaps you and I are honest men, but he who says so lies in his teeth," replied the Panther, coolly. "Bah! let us take off our masks; mine is gone already; why wear yours? I am not a child, to be deceived by a hollow smile or a few smooth words. I've had quite a wonderful adventure since I saw you last. Can you guess where I have just come from?"

Bandera shook his head.

"Straight from hell!" cried the adventurer, pointing downward.

Bandera looked in the face of the other in wonder. The thought entered his mind that he was talking with a madman.

"And Satan sent me back to earth for you. He said that his kingdom would never be complete until he had Lope, the Panther, and Ponce de Bandera, roasting in the same fire!" and the adventurer laughed long and loud.

Bandera bit his lip in despair.

"I'll tell you all about it—how I met my death, I mean. A certain casket of lead was concealed in a certain well. I went for it. A friend of mine discovered by some means—how, I confess, I can not guess—that I would seek this well. The ambush was laid; the wolves waited for their prey; like a lamb I walked into the slaughter-pen. The combat begins; the lamb turns into a panther, and the wolves feel his teeth. They consult together, and the result gained is great. In fair fight, one bids fair to conquer three—the man at the bottom of the well to kill his assailants above one by one. The wolves try strategy since open force failed. They toppled the stones, which form the coping of the well, down upon him—bury him living; exit Panther."

"But you escaped?" Bandera said, coldly.

"Exactly; in the side of the well was a hole; in the hole was the Panther, transformed for the nonce into a ground-hog, chuckling with glee when he heard the stones rattle down, and the shouts of his enemies ringing in his ears. So sure were the wolves that they had finished their prey, that they cried aloud with delight. The man snugly curled up in his hole thought that it would be a sin for his assailants to have any doubts about their triumph after having so much trouble; so he uttered his death-groans in the most affecting and heart-rending manner. It would have pierced a heart of

stone to have listened to the last despairing cries of that poor mortal. In fact, the effect upon me was so strong, that I had quite an argument with myself before I could really believe that I was alive." And the adventurer laughed quietly to himself.

"Well, what have you to say?" asked Bandera, a peculiar look appearing on his face; it was evident that he had thought of some plan which promised relief.

"Only to repeat my former request. I am madly in love with your beautiful daughter; give her to me, or else the consequences may be unpleasant. I suppose it is hardly necessary to remark that a certain leaden casket is in my possession; that in that casket I found the papers which I placed there some years ago."

"How long will you give me to think this matter over?" asked Bandera, slowly.

"Oh, my worthy and esteemed friend, you are at it again!" cried the Panther, scornfully. "Why try your wits against mine, since so far I have beaten you at every point? You wish time to think the matter over; eh? Oh, no! I know better than that; you wish time to try some new device to remove me from your path. Now, I flatter myself that I have not lived in the world as long as I have, without learning something. I am alone, friendless; you are rich, powerful. Against your weapons I have only a single shield, a crafty brain. I am prepared for you. The best horse will stumble sometimes, though; you have attempted my life once, and failed; the second time you may be more successful. Lope, the Panther, falls by secret stab or sudden shot. Good! He is dead, and his secret dies with him! Certainly! a wise conclusion. But Lope, the Panther, knows the man he has to deal with. He confides the precious casket to a friend, and with it a pledge which will make that friend faithful to his trust. He says, 'If any thing should happen to me—if you should hear of my sudden death, or if you do not see me within three days, you will take that casket to a certain address in the city of Mexico; there you will deliver it, and receive so many golden ounces.' The parties in Mexico are already advised that their former companion is on a track which promises gold. Have you made the right deduction? When you kill Lope, the Panther, you only place three or four more panthers on the scent. You can buy me off cheaper than you can three or four men, each one as big a rascal as myself."

Bandera stroked his beard thoughtfully, while the Panther watched him, narrowly.

"Well, have you decided?" asked the adventurer at length, impatiently.

"Yes," the old Mexican replied, slowly.

"You yield to my demand, then?"

"No."

"No!" exclaimed the Panther, in astonishment.

"You hear aright," Bandera said, coolly.

"You dare me, then?"

"Yes."

"Yet all the points of the game are in my favor."

"No."

"What card is wanting to complete my game?"

"The trump—the missing heir," and for the first time, a half-smile came over Bandera's stern face.

"You think that I have not got her, then?"

"I know that you have not."

"How do you know that?"

"Because she is dead."

"You lie!" cried the Panther, fiercely; "within three days I will produce her living!"

"And until you do, I defy you! Begone!"

With a sneer upon his lips the Panther left the room.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A NEW TRAIL.

"I'll find her, if Mexico holds her!" quoth the Panther, as he crossed the courtyard. "By the Virgin, I have put the cart before the horse in this matter; I should have first found the heir and then sought Bandera. Caramba! my wits have been wool-gathering! It is not too late yet, though. My gentle senor spoke very confidently when he proclaimed that the heir was dead." The adventurer came to a sudden halt, and pulled the ends of his long mustache reflectively. "Can it be possible that, by some lucky chance, he has stumbled upon the heir, recognized and removed the only obstacle between him and the broad acres of Bandera? Ponce, like myself, is a son of the devil, and Satan always aids his own. The end of this affair, though, will prove which of us is the favored son. I've run one fox to earth—one trail to its end; now, sleuth-hound-like, I'll give tongue upon the other. Oh, Satan, great king of evil, aid now thy son!"

With this pious invocation upon his lips, the Panther proceeded upon his way.

The broad and arching gateway that led from the courtyard of the hacienda to the outer air was lit by a single huge candle that flamed furiously from its socket in the wall.

Beneath the candle sat a man, his face buried in his hands. Lope glanced at the apparent sleeper as he approached.

The glance told him that the man was a herdsman; the fashion of the dress denoted that.

Roused from his sleep—or abstraction, whichever it was—

by the sound of the Panther's footsteps approaching, the herdsman raised his head.

The light of the candle flashed upon his face.

A single look the adventurer gave at the features of the herdsman, and then he halted, as though transfixed by astonishment.

"St. Jago!" murmured the Panther, in blank surprise.

On his part the herdsman looked at the Mexican with astonishment plainly apparent in his stolid features. It was evident that Lope was a stranger to him.

"Satan has answered my prayer, or else this is the strangest resemblance that the world has ever seen," the adventurer muttered between his teeth.

A second searching glance the Panther gave at the dusky face of the herdsman.

"It can not be accident," he muttered, in a tone of firm conviction.

Then, with a gracious smile upon his face, he accosted the herdsman.

"Senor, I never saw such a resemblance in all my life—your face and the features of a comrade of mine with whom I served in Southern Mexico some twenty years ago. He was somewhat lighter in complexion than yourself, but the moment I saw your face, I inwardly exclaimed, yonder is the son of my old friend. What might I call your name?"

"Juan," replied the herdsman, evidently thoroughly astonished by the manner of the stranger.

"And you are employed by my worthy friend, Ponce de Bandera here?" the Panther questioned, carelessly.

"Yes, senor; I was engaged this very day."

"Is Bandera blind?" muttered the Panther between his teeth, "or has he noted the resemblance and taken this fellow into his service that he might keep his eyes upon him?" The first move in the game is his, but the second is mine, and I'll play at once. Now, my gentle Ponce, put your wits to work, for it is a nut of iron that I give you to crack."

Lope stepped forward, and placed his hand upon the shoulder of the herdsman with an appearance of great kindness.

"By the saints, I swear that the sight of your face is more welcome to me than would be the gift of a hundred golden ounces. That you are the son of my old friend I am sure. What was your father's name?"

"I do not know, senor," replied the herdsman; "I never knew who my parents were. I am an orphan."

"But you remember something of your childhood?"

"Oh, yes."

"My life against a coyote's that you are the man I take you for!" cried Lope, confidently. "If you have nothing better to do, come with me, and over a glass of mescal you shall tell me of your life, and then, possibly, I can put you on a scent which shall lead to fortune."

The herdsman opened his great black eyes wide in astonishment.

"Oh, do not doubt my power until I have tried and failed!" exclaimed the Panther. "Come with me and test whether my guess be true or false."

The herdsman rose slowly to his feet; there was a peculiar look upon his dusky face and a strange light shining in his dark eyes.

"Well, I will go, senor," he said.

The Panther cast a rapid glance at the herdsman's face as he passed by him. In the face he saw something that puzzled him. There was a certain expression there that seemed foreign to the stolid features of the half-breed.

"I must take care how I handle this tool," he murmured to himself, as he passed through the gateway and led the way into the gloom; "the edge is sharp, and I may cut my own fingers with it if I am not watchful."

In the road the adventurer drew the arm of the herdsman within his own, and the two bent their footsteps toward Dhanis.

As they walked on, arm and arm, the Panther beguiled the way with many a strange story of daring adventures and desperate struggles for fortune.

The herdsman listened attentively, but made answer only by monosyllables.

If it was the purpose of the adventurer to draw the other from his reserve he failed most signally. But Lope, neither by word or look betrayed that he was defeated in his endeavor.

The silver tone of the Mission-bell, ringing out clear on the night air, told that the hour of ten had come, when the strange comrades halted before the door of the little wine-shop kept by Diego.

The light shining through the lattice window showed that the wine-shop was still open.

Without ceremony, Lope pushed open the door and entered, the herdsman following at his heels.

Diego sat within the room, fast asleep.

The abrupt entrance of the two awoke him rudely from his slumber. He rose, rubbed his eyes, and scowled deeply when he saw that the adventurer was his guest.

"A flask of mescal, worthy Diego," said the Panther, tossing a silver coin down upon the table.

The dull eyes of the Mexican host brightened somewhat at the sight of the glittering coin.

"Yes, senor," he said, picking up the money and quitting the room.

"Be seated, senor!" cried Lope, courteously placing a chair for the herdsman.

The half-breed seated himself by the table, but, as he sat down, cast a wary glance around as though he feared danger.

The look was not lost upon Lope.

"What the devil is he afraid of?" the Panther muttered to himself. "One would think that he was a criminal who feared an officer of justice in each shadow."

The Panther sat down opposite to his guest, just a little puzzled.

Diego brought the flask of mescal into the room, placed it upon the table and then withdrew.

Lope filled the leaden cups, which were on the table, full to the brim with the fiery liquor, pushed one across to the herdsman and raised the other to his lips.

"We'll drink to your father's memory," he said.

At a single draught the Panther drained the cup, but the herdsman only tasted the liquor, and an expression of disgust came over his face as the potent fluid coursed down his throat.

"You do not fancy the liquor," Lope said, in astonishment.

"It burns like fire," the herdsman answered.

"Sure proof of strength and goodness!" Lope exclaimed. "Perhaps you prefer wine?"

"I don't know," the herdsman replied, simply.

"Don't know!" cried the adventurer, thoroughly astonished.

"No; I never tasted this liquid fire before," the other said, disgust in his tone and face. "It is only fit for dogs; it makes a man a beast," and with a single motion of his wrist he spilled the liquor upon the floor.

"A half-breed who don't drink!" muttered Lope to himself, in wonder; "the age of miracles has come again; next we will hear of an Indian who will not kill, or a Government official who will not steal."

"You wished to tell me something of my parents," the herdsman said, abruptly.

"Yes, but time enough for that; the night is still young. Do you like to hear stories? I have a wonderful store—strange ones, too. I'll tell you one that your father once told to me, that is, when I say 'your father,' I mean my old comrade-in-arms, whose son I think you are," Lope said, without giving the herdsman a chance to answer his question.

"What makes you think that I am the son of your friend?" asked the half-breed, abruptly.

"Because you look so much like him—you are his living image. The only difference I can note is that you are darker in color than he. I'd willingly wager what little I have in the world that your mother was an Indian girl."

"Yes; I can remember that."

"You do remember a little of your childhood, then?"

"Yes, but only a little," the herdsman answered, slowly, "and after that little comes a blank, then a new life."

"Perhaps I may be able to fill out that blank, and thus join the old and the new life together?"

The half-breed shook his head in doubt.

"I'll try before we part this night!" Lope exclaimed. "But now for your father's story. First, though, to discover whether we are watched or not. This beggar of an inn-keeper has ears longer than a mule's, and a tongue that seldom rests."

Lope rose, went to the inner door, and opened it softly.

CHAPTER XXX

THE ATTACK.

GIRALDA released herself gently from her lover's embrace.

"We must part," she murmured; "I dare not stay longer. If my absence should be discovered, some one might come in search of me. I do not think that there is much danger of that, though, for I have made a confidant of Inez, and she has wit enough to conceal my absence."

"When shall I see you again?" Gilbert asked.

"To-morrow afternoon, when the sun begins to lose his power, I shall ride on the prairie, northward by the river," she replied, with a meaning smile.

"And I may seek you there then?"

"The prairie is free to all. If you choose to ride by the river as well as I, what harm is there in it?" Giralda answered, with a charming glance.

"I shall ride to-morrow, and my course will be northward by the river," the Mustang said.

"Oh, how dreadful it is that we are obliged to devise and plot how, where and when to meet!" the girl cried, impatiently. "My love is so strong, and you are so worthy of it, that I should not be ashamed to have all the world know of it."

"Giralda, but one more secret meeting, and then we will act openly," the Mustang said, resolutely. "I will go to your father, tell him that I love you, and ask him frankly for the priceless treasure that he has the power to give."

"And if he refuses you?" murmured the girl, softly, again nestling close to her lover's breast.

"The course of action rests with you," Gilbert replied. "Consent to go with me and I'll take you, in spite of all Mexico."

"It is a fearful thing to disobey a parent's will," Giralda said, slowly.

"Yes, and yet more fearful still for a parent to force his daughter to wed a man she can not love."

"You are right!" the girl cried, abruptly. "If my father

refuses his consent, then I must go without it, and in your love find excuse for the disobedient act."

"My own brave girl!" exclaimed the Mustang, fondly.

"Good-night," murmured the girl, softly; "though absent your face will be ever before my eyes, your voice ever ringing in my ears. It will seem a long time till to-morrow's sunset."

"Good-night."

Again the young lover held the soft form of the Mexican maid within his arms, and kissed the ripe, dewy lips, so full of the freshness of warm, young blood, and then Giralda glided away like a specter in the darkness.

The Mustang watched her disappear with a heavy heart. It seemed like a part of his life torn away from him.

"Shall I ever win her?" he asked himself, in doubt. "It does not seem possible. I'll make the attempt, though, even if it cost me my life. Her love I have already won; I am sure of that, and if fortune will but aid me, I will carry her far from here, and in my own Tennessee home find that priceless joy which her love alone can give."

The Mustang turned to depart.

A single step had he gone when, from the shelter of a cluster of cactuses, three dark forms sprung upon him.

The American was in the toils.

Mechanically he thrust out his arm and parried the knife-stroke aimed at his heart by the first assailant. A second more and his iron knuckles, shot forward with all the strength of his vigorous arm, felled a second one to the earth; but the third of the three, snake-like, grappled with him, and, with a dextrous twist, brought the Mustang down to the earth. Over and over they rolled, in close embrace.

The other two—for the man stricken to the ground by the arm of the American had gained his feet—with gleaming knives sought for an opportunity to slay the Mustang.

Then, from the shelter of the bushes, some five paces distant, came a burst of flame. 'Twas a rifle-shot, and the taller of the two, who had so unceremoniously attacked the American, dropped to the ground with a howl of agony.

The other ruffian essayed to escape, but forth from the thicket came a dark shadow; the butt of a rifle swept through the air and came crashing down with terrific force upon the head of Red Jose, for it was the half-breed White Indian who was attempting to fly.

With a sullen groan the half-breed went down to the earth, stunned.

A second shadow followed the first from the thicket, one sligher in form and carrying a light rifle in hand.

The first shadow, who had dealt Red Jose such a fearful blow, was Davy Crockett; the second, who had fired the shot which had laid the chief of the White Indians, Michael Dago, in the dust, was Silver Spear, the Prairie Mazepa.

By the time that Crockett and the Indian girl reached the side of Gilbert, the Mustang had conquered his assailant, Pepe the Snake, and, with his iron hand choking the breath out of him, held him firmly to the ground despite his efforts to rise.

"Wake snakes! but we've whipped tarnation right out of them, the p'isoned sarpints!" cried Crockett, in triumph.

"I thank you for my life!" exclaimed the Mustang, still holding the writhing Mexican in a grasp of iron.

"Nary time!" replied the borderer; "but this splendid-looking she-critter hyer; the gal you saved from the back of the wild hoss."

"And who thus repays the debt she owed," said the girl, in her low, soft tones.

"But what on yearth have you got thar? a pig, a 'coon, or a grizzly b'ar?" asked Crockett, with a grin, referring to the struggling Mexican.

"Worse; a cowardly Mexican murderer," replied the Mustang, his knife at the throat of the Snake, threatening instant death.

"Kill the durned skunk," ejaculated Crockett, enjoying the terror of the yellow ruffian.

"Mercy, senor!" gasped the Snake.

"Would you have shown mercy to me had fortune favored your attack?" asked Gilbert, sternly.

"I only acted under orders," the Mexican said, in extreme terror.

"The mean, sneaking cuss ought for to die," cried Crockett; "but don't soil your knife by stickin' it into him; jest hold up his head, and let me grin him to death."

"Who employed you to murder me?" asked the Mustang.

"I don't know," the Mexican gasped.

"You lie, you son of a perairie-dog!" cried Crockett, expressing his contempt for the prostrate Mexican, by bestowing a hearty kick upon that unfortunate gentleman. "Spit out who it was, or I'll boot you to death, by thunder!"

The Snake glared around him. No avenue of escape appeared to his view; he was a helpless prisoner in the hands of the man whose life he had sought. He had little doubt that the stalwart American would keep his word, and the slight touch that he had already felt of the muscular foot of the borderer, had fully convinced him that to be kicked to death was not the most pleasant ending possible.

"If I speak, will you let me go free?" he asked, humbly.

"Yes," Gilbert replied.

"Don't you do it, Gil!" cried Crockett. "Make him speak, and then let me eat him afterward. I ain't had a raw Mexican fur some time, an' my jaws r'ally water fur this fat little yaller cuss," and Crockett smacked his lips with a hearty crack.

Pepe groaned in terror.

"Oh, senor, don't let that cannibal eat me!" he cried.

"Ef I can't have the hull of him, jest gi'n me his big toe, and one of his ears, for a titbit, an' I won't growl a mite," pleaded Crockett, with mock earnestness.

"Spare me, and I will tell all I know," cried Pepe, in abject terror.

"Go on; but beware how you attempt to deceive us!" said the Mustang, sternly.

"Ef he lies a mite, I'll tan his hide to make me moccasins!" exclaimed Crockett.

Again Pepe shuddered at the fearful threat.

"I will speak nothing but the truth," he said, earnestly.

"Ponce de Bandera wished us to attack you, and placed us in ambush."

"I reckoned that it was either the old Don or the young Mexican cuss," Crockett murmured.

Gilbert did not doubt that the prostrate ruffian spoke the truth. He rose to his feet, releasing the Mexican.

"Begone!" he said.

The Snake did not wait for a second bidding, but sprung quickly to his feet.

"Come hyar, an' let me cut off your ear!" cried Crockett.

With a single bound the Mexican disappeared in the thicket.

Crockett examined the two who had fallen in the struggle.

Dago was bleeding profusely, but still breathed, while Red Jose seemed to be dead, killed outright.

"I reckoned that he wouldn't be worth much for this world arter I fitched him a lick with my rifle-butt, unless he had a head thicker'n a buffler bull," Crockett remarked.

"We'll leave them to their fate," Gilbert said, and the three quitted the spot.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE STORY OF THE HALF-BREED.

THE Panther listened attentively at the door for a few moments, then he opened it softly, and looked into the inner room. A candle was burning on the table, and Diego sat by it, his head resting on his arms, which were laid upon the table. He was evidently sound asleep. If the Panther had had doubts regarding this fact, the lengthened snore which came from the sleeper would have removed them.

The adventurer closed the door softly, and returned again to the table.

The herdsman had watched his movements narrowly, a peculiar light shining in his dark eyes. There was the same strange expression upon his face which had puzzled the keen wits of the Panther.

Evidently the half-breed was not quite so simple as he pretended to be.

"Good; the beggar is sleeping soundly," Lope said, resuming his former seat at the table. "I hate eavesdroppers, and though our conversation can not concern any one but ourselves, still I do not care to have some meddling fool overhear it."

The half-breed nodded assent, but spoke not.

"Now for the story. In the first place I will state that your father always declared that it was founded on truth."

"My father?"

"Yes—of course I mean my old comrade—that man whom you resemble so greatly."

"I understand," the herdsman said, slowly.

"In early youth your father—my old friend, you understand—was a herdsman on a great estate in North-eastern Mexico. The estate was just on the debatable ground of the red Indian and the civilized Mexican. Behind it, Mexico; church, priest, town and smiling harvest-field; before it, the prairie, the painted chiefs, the wigwags of skin, the shining lance, and the keen-edged scalping knife."

"The owner of the vast estate was a man some eight and twenty years of age. In person, tall and straight, coal-black hair and eyes, a long, pointed beard growing from the chin, but smoothly shaven on the cheeks. The coal-black hair curled down over his shoulders, fine as silk and glossy as the coat of the wild mare. His face, though exposed to prairie wind and sun, was as white and as fair as the skin of a woman reared within a dark convent's walls."

Lope paused for a moment, his eyes attentively fixed upon the face of the other.

The features of the herdsman showed traces of strong agitation. Mechanically he passed his hand across his brow as though by the action to quicken thought.

The Panther noted the strange movements of the half-breed with a quiet smile.

"You seem deeply interested in my story," he said, carelessly, "and yet it is only the beginning—only the description of one of the characters that is to figure in it."

"I can not remember—" the herdsman said, vaguely.

"Can not remember what?" Lope asked, in affected astonishment.

"Can not remember where I have seen this man whom you have described," the half-breed said, slowly, and in evident bewilderment.

"Oh! you think that you have seen him, then?" Lope cried, quickly.

"Yes; I am sure that I have seen such a man, but it seems to me that it was in a dream rather than in reality," the herdsman replied, a look of painful bewilderment on his face. "I can remember the long, dark hair curling around

the neck, the white features, the pointed beard. I can remember touching the beard with my hand, the hair soft as the brain-tanned deer-skin. Oh!" and the herdsman pressed both his hands convulsively to his temples, "it makes my head ache to think. What spell have you put upon me?" he demanded, fiercely, rising and extending his hands threateningly toward the adventurer.

Lope regarded him with a quiet smile.

"Easy and gently, senior," he said calmly. "It is not my fault if the story that I tell calls up a flood of thoughts. Rather thank me for giving your memory work."

"It is this cursed liquor of fire that I have swallowed that has maddened me!" the half-breed exclaimed in strange excitement, a wonderful contrast to his usual icy bearing.

Then, with a sudden movement, he seized the flask of mescal and dashed it through the lattice window. Lope watched the action, but made no movement to prevent it.

For a moment the half-breed glared at him, and then, as if ashamed of his angry passion, sunk into his chair, sullenly.

"I must be an enchanter to raise such a storm with words alone!" Lope exclaimed, with his usual baffling smile.

"Go on!" muttered the half-breed, hoarsely.

"A moment, gentle senior!" Lope said, with a calming wave of the hand. "Yon broken lattice made some noise when it was shattered. Before I go on, let me discover whether the long-eared Diego still sleepeth."

Lope rose from his seat and again opened the door leading to the inner room.

The Mexican host still slumbered, his head resting on the table.

"This fellow makes a business of sleep; no cat-like slumbers for him."

Fully satisfied, Lope resumed his seat.

"Now for my story again. The owner of the vast estate possessed a young and beautiful wife; I say beautiful, yet her skin was red and the blood of the great Comanche nation flowed in her veins. She was an Indian girl. Her husband had found her wounded near to death on the prairie. He had taken her home, cured the gory stabs of the horns of the buffalo bull, then married her. Two children were born unto him—a boy and girl.

"At the time that my story commences, the boy was about four years old, the girl a year younger. Your father used to take great delight in carrying the young heir in many a wild chase over the great prairie, mounted on a milk-white mustang of surpassing beauty."

Again the herdsman started; again the breath came thick and heavy, and the great cords knotted on the forehead.

"A milk-white mustang!" he murmured, dreamily; "I remember; all white but a black muzzle."

"Yes, I think that your father in telling of the steed he used to ride when he carried the young heir in his prairie gallops, said that he was marked as you describe."

"My father—" again the tone of doubt; again the strange look in the herdsman's eyes.

"I mean my old friend, of course—the man whom you so strangely resemble—who I think is your father."

"Yes."

"To resume," and Lope fixed his gaze upon the dark face of the herdsman, a little light of triumph shining in his keen eyes. "The owner of the vast estate had an enemy—a man who sought his life. One night the whoop of the wild Indians sounded around the hacienda. Flame and steel had come to do their work of slaughter. My friend was one of the first aroused by the attack. He clasped the boy and girl to his breast, mounted the milk-white mustang, and made a bold dash for life. Fortune favored him. In the darkness he escaped unnoticed. He gained a place of safety, left his children there, and then, when morning came, he returned to see what had transpired during his absence. A scene of slaughter met his eyes. The owner of the vast estate—the man with the white face and the long black hair, mortally wounded, had found a grave within the rushing current of the Sego—"

"The Sego!" cried the herdsman, with a glance of fire.

"Yes; did I not mention that the estate I have referred to was washed by the Sego?"

"No."

"It was my carelessness, then," Lope said. "The wife was still living; her lips told the story of the slaughter, and then she died. Now, the natural question is, why did not my friend bring back the children to claim the estate? I will explain. My friend was a cunning fellow and somewhat skilled in prairie craft. He was fully satisfied that the Indians were white men in disguise—that the owner of the hacienda had fallen by the hand of a brother. He knew that that brother would be the guardian of the infant heirs, and he guessed that in the second attempt he would not fail to remove all obstacles between himself and the estate he coveted. So, without betraying to mortal that the heirs still lived—letting all believe that they had perished either in the flames or in the river, he took service with the murderous brother. A short six months came and went, and the Mexican moon shone clear in the heavens. By its light the Comanches rode to slaughter. At the dead hour of night they attacked the little settlement where the two children had been placed for safe-keeping. What force could withstand five hundred red warriors led by the 'Horse-tamer,' at that time the great chief of the Comanches? The attack succeeded, and the two children disappeared forever.

"This is my friend's story."

The herdsman looked at the adventurer for a moment, keenly.

"And my father told you this story?"

"Yes."

"You speak lies! It is your own story! You are the herdsman who once rode the milk-white mustang. All comes back to me now. The dream of my childhood is reality. I am the heir to the great estate you spoke of. I can remember the rides on the prairie—the midnight attack—then, the priest with whom you placed me, and after that the Indians' raid. My sister and I were carried away by one of the Indian warriors. Then came a fierce encounter with the Mexican soldiers; the savages were beaten and forced to fly; I was retaken by the Mexicans. My sister disappeared, I know not where. But, my father's name? tell it to me."

"What will you give me for the knowledge?" quoth Lope, with a charming smile.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DISDAINING FORTUNE.

"WHAT will I give?" asked the half-breed, looking with wonder written on his face at the wily Mexican. "What can I give?"

"That which all men crave in this world—ay, and all the women, too—gold; the glittering metal which, wrung from mother earth, makes man a king among his fellows," replied Lope.

"Gold!" ejaculated the herdsman in wonder. "I have none."

"Oh, yes you have!" cried Lope, quickly. "Say but the word and I will place in your gripe more golden ounces than your eyes have ever seen. Give unto you more broad acres than your feet can cover from sunset to sunset."

"To me, the poor herdsman?" the half-breed said, doubtfully.

"To you; now, the simple herdsman only, but confide yourself and fortunes to my care, and in the future you shall hold your head up with the proudest don in Mexico. You are the heir to the richest estate from the great Staked Plain to the Mexican gulf."

"How can you prove that?"

"Simple enough. I have all the papers in my possession to prove your identity. I am the herdsman who rode with you on the milk-white mustang on the night when your father was slain."

"I am the only heir, then—but my sister?" asked the herdsman, suddenly.

"I have lost all traces of her," replied Lope, evasively.

"But are you sure that I can claim this vast estate that you speak of?" said the half-breed, doubtfully.

"With my aid, yes; without my aid, no. You see, I hold all the proofs in my hands. I alone of all the world have the power to give you your fortune or to hold it from you."

The herdsman looked at the Mexican for a moment in silence. Again Lope caught the peculiar gleam that flashed from the eyes of the half-breed; again he was puzzled. He could not understand the meaning of the look.

Then the herdsman spoke.

"You can give me my fortune?"

"Yes."

"Or hold it from me?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me the name of my father?"

"Not until you make a bargain," replied Lope, carelessly.

"It does not matter, I will find it out for myself," the half-breed said, slowly.

"Oh, the devil you will!" cried Lope, in astonishment.

"Well, now let me tell you, my dear young friend, that you stand about as much chance of finding out what you wish to know, without my assistance, as you do of leveling the wall of Bandera's hacienda with a word."

"That might be possible if I spoke loud enough," the herdsman returned quietly, with another peculiar glance.

"You'll never be hung for your modesty, my gentle herdsman!" exclaimed Lope, in astonishment, and just a little annoyed at the coolness of the other.

"Nor you for your honesty," replied the other, tersely.

"Caramba! if we go on at this rate, we shall come to blows instead of to an understanding," Lope said, with an effort curbing down his rising temper.

"What understanding can we come to?" asked the herdsman, a blank look upon his face.

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Lope, impatiently. "You're not such a simpleton as all that. You know well enough what I mean. I didn't bring you here for nothing. The moment I saw your face I felt sure that you were the heir that I was in search of. I told you the story of your life. As I expected, you recognized it at once. Now, then, what will you give me if I put you in possession of your estate?"

"What do you want?"

"A good round price, I own," replied Lope, frankly. "Half of what I get for you. I am dealing more liberally with you than with the other party—"

"The other party," interrupted the half-breed.

"Yes; your worthy uncle who now holds the estate. The

only terms that I would give him were, that he must make me his son-in-law, and thus in time give all the property to me."

"His son-in-law!" cried the half-breed, quickly, and a glance of fire shot from his dark eyes.

"Oh, cursed blunder!" muttered Lope between his teeth, as he noted the expression upon the face of the other. "Have I put him on the scent?"

The eyes of the half-breed were cast upon the ground in dreamy meditation.

"Yes; I made the offer to him in the city of Mexico some two months ago, just before I set out for the frontier," Lope added, carelessly.

"Ah, my estate is in the city of Mexico, then?" the herdsman said, raising his head and looking Lope full in the face with his brilliant black eyes.

"How in Satan's name did you guess that?" cried the Mexican in affected astonishment. "You have keen wits, I own; but the city of Mexico is large, and I defy you to find your estate there. Besides, even if you should discover it, you must come to me for the papers which alone can give it to you."

"I do not care for it," cried the half-breed, sullenly and slowly.

"Not care for it?" cried Lope, in amazement.

"No. What can gold give me more than I have already?" the half-breed said with true contempt for the refinements of civilization.

"Then you do not care to make a bargain with me?" Lope cried in a tone of disgust.

"No," and the herdsman rose to his feet.

"You do not want the estate?"

"No," again the half-breed said.

"My friend, let me give you a word of advice at parting," Lope cried, contemptuously. "Just pull off the herdsman's yellow boots and go and join your barefooted red brothers on the prairie. There is more of the Indian than the white man in you."

The herdsman looked at the Mexican for a moment in silence, the peculiar gleam again in his eyes, and then, without a word, stalked through the door and disappeared.

"The fiends seize him!" cried Lope, in rising wrath. "A stolid, wooden-headed piece of clay. A dull ass, with not brains enough to seize the fortune which my hand can give him. I must make terms with Bandera, then. He must yield. I'll see him the first thing in the morning; proclaim that the heir is here and that I will reveal all to him unless he pays me well to keep silent. In the morning?" and Lope rose and pulled the ends of his long mustache, thoughtfully. "No, no; first to discover whether the girl be alive or dead. Now I remember, Bandera declared that she was dead—or that I could not find her—the same thing; for, if she was in the flesh he would not have spoken so confidently. Can he have stumbled upon her by accident while I have been absent, and seized upon some opportunity to remove her from his path? It is possible. I recognized the boy at a glance. Why should his eyes be less keen than mine? I'll satisfy myself on that point at once. I'll seek the priest to whose care I confided the girl. If she lives, Bandera tremble, for I'll wrest the estate from you, even from your very teeth, though you hold it with a wolf-like grip! Now for bed and sleep."

The Mexican quitted the drinking-shop.

Hardly had the door closed behind him when from the inner room the ratlike visage of Diego appeared. No trace of sleep was upon the face of the keeper of the wine-shop, but there was a twinkle of low cunning in the beadlike black eyes.

"The Virgin save us, what have I heard?" cried the Mexican, in wonder. "Often have I heard my father tell the story of the attack on the hacienda of Bandera, and of the supposed death of all within the household. So, this strange herdsman is the nephew of Senor Ponce de Bandera and the heir to the estate?"

The Mexican stroked his chin for a moment in deep thought.

"This is a difficult business," he said, slowly, communing with himself. "If I go to Senor Ponce and tell him all that I have overheard, he will see at once that I know that this half-breed is a nephew of his. Of course he will not give up his property to the half-savage and this vagabond adventurer without a struggle. I shall be dragged into the mess, and the first thing I know, I shall wake up some fine morning with my throat cut."

And the prudent Diego looked serious.

"Caramba!" he cried, after a moment's thought. "I have it! I will go to Senor Ponce and tell him just enough of what I have heard to put him on his guard, without betraying to him that I have the slightest suspicion that he is concerned in the matter in any way whatever. That will do! He will reward me of course. At early daybreak I'll set out."

Then Diego proceeded to close the wine-shop.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A GLEAM OF REASON.

THE Indian girl, the Mustanger and Crockett stood together beneath the shadow of the cactuses where the horses were tethered.

The three had just reached the spot coming from the scene of the attack and rout of the White Indians.

The girl turned.

"I have paid the debt I owed, and now, farewell," she said.

"You ain't goin'?" cried Crockett.

"I must."

"Let me thank you first for the life that you have saved!" exclaimed Gilbert, warmly.

"No, no thanks; we are even now," the girl said, slowly.

"Don't know as you know it, little 'un, but you came tarnation nigh gittin' a ball socked right plum through you, when you came stealin' along in the dark. I were jist a-goin' to let drive when I diskivered who it were. You see, Jerusalem smelt you out for an Injun, an' I never guessed but what it were one on the painted serpents."

"I saw you pass when you rode into the river," the girl said, "but as I had previously seen those bold, bad men lying concealed in the bushes, I knew that they waited for a human prey; when I saw you, I guessed that it was for you that they lay in ambush."

"I reckon that that long feller thought that he had been sent for when you plugged him with your rifle," Crockett said.

"Those three men wronged me so terribly," the girl observed, with a mournful sigh.

"Wronged you?" Gilbert said, in astonishment; "you know them then?"

"Yes, few dwellers for leagues around but know of the White Indians and of their terrible deeds," the girl replied.

"I reckon I've got it for sure!" Crockett cried, suddenly.

"Them skunks air the ones who tied you on the back of the wild boss?"

"Yes," the girl answered.

"What motive had they to commit such a terrible crime? Surely you could never have wronged them in any way."

"No; they were but the hands that executed another's will."

"And that other?" Gilbert questioned.

"You forget; I have before told you that I could not reveal who it was that placed me in such terrible peril."

"But the motive for such a fearful inhuman act?"

"To separate me from the man that I love," the girl said, slowly, her dark cheeks suffused with blushes.

"But who could wish to do that?"

"His father," she replied, in answer to the question of the Mustanger.

"And because the son loves you, the father dooms you to such a terrible death?" Gilbert exclaimed, in great astonishment.

"Yes."

"And for the son's sake you will not reveal the name of your cruel enemy?"

"No."

"I'm sorry for it!" cried Crockett, emphatically. "It would do my heart good fur to tan the hide of sich a pesky varmint as he must be. Jerusalem, I'd wallon him as ~~that~~ ^{that} wouldn't be any thing but a grease-spot!"

"It must not be!" exclaimed the girl, quickly; "even now I am in search of the man that I love so well, to tell him that we must part forever."

"And jist 'cos the old coon objects?" Crockett asked.

"Yes."

"Don't you do it; let the pesky old villain go to grass. Don't let your young affection run to seed in any sich fashion. Stick to the man you love like a lean dog to a shin of beef. You're sure you're right, so go ahead!"

"Danger lurks in the air!" cried a deep voice, and a stalwart figure rose, phantom-like, from the gloom of the earth.

"Wake snakes an' come to me! hyer's that tarnal critter again!" muttered Crockett, as he recognized the person of the madman.

The strange being was clad as usual in the garb of skins, and bore in his hand the knotted club.

The girl shrunk closer to the side of the Mustanger as the madman rose from the earth.

Dark as was the night, the glaring orbs of the maniac noticed the movement of the girl.

"Right! shrink from me!" he muttered, his eyes rolling in strange frenzy. "I am dangerous to you, dangerous to all who have eyes black as night—eyes such as *she* had when she dwelt on earth. That was long ago," he added, in a mournful tone and with a shake of the head. "Now she is a saint above—in that heaven that the Mission priest told me of when I was a little boy, playing around my mother's knee by the sunny banks of the Sego. She is an angel above—a white-robed messenger of peace with great golden wings and a shining halo of light playing around her temples, not like the earthly flame which sometimes crowns my head when I scare the brutal, earth-painted warrior from his prey. She comes down in a flood of silver light and talks to me when I couch like the panther amid the rocks of the barranca. She is an angel of love and peace, and yet she sometimes whispers in my ears that I have a mission of blood, that I must stain my hands crimson with human gore."

The hearers shuddered, despite their firm nerves, at the words of the hapless madman.

The maniac glared around him for a moment, and then stepped noiselessly to the side of the Mustanger, whose arm encircled the slender waist of the Indian girl.

"That is right," he muttered; "find protection in his strong arm. He is of another race; I can not harm him. She

came to me last night. Before she has always bidden me to slay the murdering red wolves who claim the prairie as their own; but last night she whispered in my ear that I must have Mexican blood. She told me the name of the man that I must kill, how he looked, and where I should find him. The time will soon come, for I dreamed it all over last night. I must strike him amid the smoke of an Indian wigwam far off on the prairie. Strange! and when I killed him, her eyes looked at me out of his face."

The two Americans listened in wonder to the incoherent words of the singular being.

The madman strode suddenly over to Crockett. The hardy woodman, astonished at the action, retreated a pace and laid his hand upon his hunting-knife.

The maniac never noticed the threatening action, but placed his hand upon the shoulder of the borderer and peered intently into his face; then he bent his head down and whispered, lowly and mysteriously, into the ear of Crockett.

"Were you ever mad?" he said.

Crockett stared at the question.

"I reckon I never was—not as I knows on," he replied, honestly.

"It is a terrible thing to be mad—terrible when the moments of sanity come, and you remember what you have done in your madness. I remember every thing—twenty years back. It's a dreadful thing to be mad for twenty years."

"Yes, I reckon so," Crockett said, dubiously, a cold shiver creeping over him as the ice-like face of the madman came close to his own.

"When we are mad, we hate those whom in sanity we love. What is this thing called the brain?" he questioned, suddenly. "Why should we go mad? The soul can not be sick; why should the brain? Why should we think things other than they are? Question me, I can talk with you. My memory is good; I can tell you every thing that I have done for twenty years. Tell you as well about the acts I have committed during my insane moments as of those when I have been in full possession of my reason. I can't understand it. Now, for the moment, I am sane. I would not harm a hair of yonder child's head for the world. Even the Indian chief, the White Mustang, I would not harm, for there is something in his eyes which calls back to me one whom I have loved and lost. But the very instant the madness comes back to me, I crave the blood of the Indian chief and of this girl. The chief I shall kill—I know it—I feel it; but this poor girl—Heaven grant that she escape me! Let her avoid me, for in my madness I shall kill her."

He leaned his head down heavily upon the shoulder of Crockett, much to the borderer's dismay, for stout-hearted Crockett feared the terrible madman.

"Hush!" cried the latter, raising his head suddenly and glaring around him, "do you not hear?"

"What?" asked Crockett, who could not distinguish a sound.

"The unshod hoofs of the Indian mustangs striking on the prairie. The Comanches are in the saddle and they ride to death. Warn them at Dhanis that the Mexican moon is rising. A thousand strong, the red avalanche sweeps over the prairie. Blood will flow like spring rain. Be warned!"

And then the madman glided away in the gloom.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE STRICKEN MAN.

GIRALDA, after leaving her lover, proceeded at once to the hacienda; wrapped in the dark cloak, she glided swiftly over the ground.

Already she had passed over half the distance between the place of meeting and the hacienda, when the sounds of the attack of the outlaws upon the American rung out shrilly on the night-air.

Giralda stopped in alarm. She guessed at once that the sounds boded danger to her lover.

"Oh, Holy Mother, shield him from harm!" she murmured, through white lips.

The noise of the contest continued. The rifle-shot broke upon the stillness of the night.

Giralda could restrain her feelings no longer.

"They are killing him!" she murmured, in despair. "I will return; if not to save, at least to die with him!"

But as she turned to retrace her steps, a dark figure rose from the bushes by her side and stayed her.

"Giralda!" cried a deep voice, and the girl at once recognized that the figure that barred her onward course was her father's.

"Father," she murmured.

"Disobedient girl! can you look that father in the face?" Bandera asked, sternly.

"Let me go," she cried, vainly endeavoring to escape from the grasp of iron that detained her.

"Whither would you go? To where yonder night-brawlers affront heaven's peace with their acts of violence?" the father demanded.

"They are killing him! Oh, father, have mercy and let me go to his aid!" she implored.

"Think you that you can save your accursed lover from the fate he so richly deserves? By Heaven, I can almost find it in my heart to strike you to my feet for daring to beg mercy for this accursed heretic!" cried Bandera, fiercely.

"Strike!" cried Giralda, in desperation; "as well bruise my flesh as break my heart!"

Bandera gazed at his daughter for a moment in silence. He fully realized that in her his own iron will lived again.

"Home with you at once!" he cried.

Giralda shut her white teeth together and made a last desperate effort to break the grasp of steel which imprisoned her wrist.

Vain effort!

Bandera resolutely placed his arm around her waist and forced her along toward the hacienda.

The sounds of violence had ceased and the stillness of night again reigned supreme.

At the hacienda the father forced Giralda within the gateway.

"To your room!" he cried, fiercely.

Giralda turned in defiance.

"He has escaped! do you hear? He has escaped! Go now and you will find your hired ruffians bleeding on the prairie, stricken there by his strong arm. Do your worst; you may bruise my wrist—you may break my heart, but you will never conquer my love for the Mustang!"

And with this bold defiance, Giralda disappeared.

"I will conquer her, though I break heart, life, all, in the effort!" Bandera muttered, in wrath. "She thinks that the American has escaped; why should she think so? Bah! it is but the foolish fancy of a love-sick girl; the wish is father to the thought. Small chances of the Mustang escaping from a single-handed fight with the White Indians."

Then the thought of the rifle-shot, which had rung out so shrilly on the night-air, occurred to the Mexican. He pondered on it. The thought flashed across his brain that possibly the attack had not succeeded.

"First came the noise of the struggle, hand to hand, of course, as they sprung upon him from their ambuscade, and then the rifle-shot. I can not understand that. If they closed in upon him, how could he possibly use his rifle? Can the attack have failed?"

Bandera grew nervous at the thought.

"Suppose that the other American was near at hand? Caramba! It may be that my men have been beaten off. I can not bear this suspense. I'll see at once."

The Mexican set out for the scene of the recent conflict.

As he came near, he took the precaution to draw a pistol, from his belt and raise the hammer.

Cautiously he proceeded onward.

The night was dark, and the faint light of the moon and stars afforded but little assistance.

Bandera at last stepped in upon the scene of the ambuscade.

By the faint light which came from the heavens he discovered a dark body lying motionless upon the ground.

"The American for a hundred ounces!" he muttered, in fierce joy, as he knelt down by the side of the body.

A careful glance, though, told him that it was the senseless form of Red Jose.

"He has been killed outright!" the Mexican muttered, in dismay.

A low groan coming from the shadow of a clump of bushes next attracted Bandera's attention.

Great was his astonishment and dismay when he discovered the leader of the White Indians, Michael Dago, stretched almost senseless upon the earth, weltering in a little pool of his own blood.

With his handkerchief Bandera endeavored to staunch the wound of the bandit.

"Heaven's curse upon this North American!" the Mexican cried, in despair. "he must have fought like a demon!"

Taking the sash from his waist, Bandera ran to the river and dipped it in the water; then he returned to the stricken bandit and bathed his brow with the moistened silk.

With a low groan the bandit chief opened his eyes; slowly, consciousness came back to him.

"Oh, Jesu save me!" he muttered, faintly. In the dark presence of the destroying angel the early teachings of the Mission-priest came back to the mind of the crime-stained ruffian.

"You are badly hurt, Michael," Bandera said, with an anxious glance in the face of the helpless man.

"Yes, done for this world," Dago murmured, faintly.

"Oh, not so bad as that, I hope," the Mexican said, cheerfully.

"My last stake is lost—the game's up. Santa Maria! how hot I am!"

The mind of the brigand was evidently wandering.

"I'll get you some water—wait a moment."

Again Bandera ran to the river; this time he filled the hollow of his hand with the limpid water and carried it to the parched lips of the outlaw.

Great drops of sweat were standing on the brow of the dying man.

"How were you hurt?" asked Bandera, anxious to learn the details of the American's escape, for escaped he surely had.

"A spirit fresh from heaven," the outlaw murmured.

"A spirit!" Bandera cried, in surprise.

"Yes—she rose out of the earth. By the flash of the rifle I saw her face—" and Dago paused, gasping for breath.

Bandera could not guess the hidden meaning of Dago's words.

Carefully he bathed his brows and wiped away the damp dews of death which were gathering so thick and fast upon the forehead of the death-stricken ruffian.

"A spirit you say?"
 "Yes, an angel from heaven sent—not to save this heretic—but to punish me," Dago said, speaking with difficulty.
 "To punish you?" Bandera exclaimed, in astonishment.
 "Yes—your turn will come next—"
 "My turn?"
 "Yes."
 "What did the spirit look like?" asked the Mexican, in wonder, perplexed by the strange words of the other, and almost convinced in his own mind that he was listening to the ravings of a maniac.
 "Why she—you know—" muttered Dago, speaking with greater difficulty and his breath coming thick and fast.
 "I do not understand you—"
 "That—girl?"
 "What girl?"
 "The one we tied on the—on the back—"
 "Of the wild horse?" cried Bandera, in consternation.
 "Yes—that one—" gasped the outlaw.
 "And she appeared to you?"
 "Her spirit—yes—shot me, here—I—your turn next—I—Santa—"
 A single gasp and baffled Bandera was alone with the dead

CHAPTER XXXV.

A PAIR OF KNAVES.

A HORSEMAN riding rapidly toward the hacienda of Bandera by the red light of the dying sun; the time, the afternoon of the following day to the one in which the interview between the wily adventurer and stolid half-breed had taken place.

The horseman was Lope, the Panther.

The expression upon the face of the adventurer was not a pleasant one; his lips were shut firmly together, and a stern and troubled glare shot from his dark eyes.

The foam gathered about his animal's muzzle, and the heaving flanks told that the rider had spared neither whip nor spur.

"Push on, you brute!" muttered the adventurer, urging on the horse with hand and heel; "night will catch us before we reach the hacienda of our dear friend, Senor Ponce de Bandera," and the Mexican laughed bitterly. "By the Virgin! I believe that this dog of a don will get the best of the struggle, after all. Santa Maria! I'll make a gallant fight for it, though. Has age saddened my brain, or have my wits gone wool-gathering since I have ridden northward to the frontier? I am not used to being beaten and baffled at every turn. One point of the game alone have I gained—the papers; they are mine, but of little use unless I find the heir. This brainless idiot of a herdsman to refuse the golden fortune which my hand offered him; bah! some men are born without brains."

Onward galloped the Mexican; swiftly, bitter thoughts swept across his brain.

The sun sunk lower and lower; the far western horizon line hid half its beams, and the new moon, the vestal orb, rose slowly in the heavens.

"You dull-paced brute, brother to a snail, will you never get me there?" and the adventurer goaded the sides of the poor beast with his cruel spurs.

The horse was exerting himself to his utmost already, and neither the fierce words of his rider nor the forcible language of the spur-points caused him to increase his pace a single jot.

Soon, above the line of the flat prairie, rose the dark walls of Bandera, frowning on the gentle river and the still prairie like some grim fortalice of the far-off, olden time.

The adventurer gave a hoarse shout of joy as he beheld the home of the man whom he sought—that home which he was striving to wrest from the grasp of its owner.

"At last!" he cried, a grim smile on his dark face. "Good! I am all impatience for the interview. A bold game I play. Bandera will be slightly astonished at my sudden and unexpected reappearance, I ween. So much the better. Perhaps I may catch him off his guard? I fancy that this will be our last interview; something within whispers me to that effect. If I do not succeed in breaking down his guard and reaching his heart with this attack, I'll even give up and seek for fortune elsewhere."

A half-hour's ride more and Lope drew rein before the gate of the hacienda.

Before he could dismount, a dozen or more herdsmen rushed from the gate and surrounded him.

The first thought of the adventurer was that the servants had been instigated by their master to attack him; but, on a second glance, he saw nothing but good-will written in the faces of those who surrounded him.

"Dismount, senor!" cried one of the herdsmen, seizing the bridle of the horse.

"Hold his stirrup, Jose!" cried a second.

"Lean upon my shoulder, senor!" exclaimed a third, proffering his assistance.

"What the devil does all this mean?" questioned Lope, of himself, in utter astonishment.

"Pray dismount, senor," said the herdsman who seemed to hold command over the others, noticing the hesitation of the rider; "our master is at home and waiting to receive you."

Lope made a grimace of astonishment; he guessed the truth; the herdsmen had mistaken him for some one else. He resolved to humor the mistake.

"It's a deuced good joke, in faith, to be conducted with all the honors to Bandera," he muttered, to himself, as he dismounted, assisted by a half-score of willing hands. "I wonder how the worthy don will enjoy it?" and Lope chuckled to himself at the thought.

"Your master is waiting to receive me, then?" the adventurer questioned, adjusting the *serape* gracefully over his shoulder.

"Yes, senor, we have been in readiness to receive you since early morning," the herdsman replied.

"Oh, it's very evident that there is some mistake here," Lope said, to himself.

"Our master was very careful to instruct us to receive you with all attention," the herdsman added.

"Indeed?"

"Oh, yes, senor!" cried the herdsmen, in chorus.

"If Bandera's temper is like mine he'll break some of these fellows' heads for this mistake," Lope muttered, laughing in his sleeve at the blunder.

"This way, senor!" cried the chief herdsman, marshaling the way into the hacienda.

"I follow you, friend," said Lope, with graceful dignity.

The herdsman got within the arch, then paused suddenly, turned and addressed the adventurer, who was close to his heels.

"The senor will pardon the question," he said, abruptly; "but will the senor remain at the hacienda to-night?"

Lope looked astonished at the question.

"No; I do not think that I shall remain," he replied, after a moment's pause.

"The senor will depart, then?"

"Yes."

"That will be after nightfall?"

"Yes." Lope was puzzled to understand the drift of the questions.

"That is bad."

"Bad?" exclaimed the adventurer, in astonishment.

"Yes, because it is dangerous."

"I do not understand you," Lope said, and the thought flashed across his mind that he really stood in more danger when within Bandera's hacienda than in any other spot in the known world.

"Do you see that there?" and the herdsman pointed to the sky as he asked the question.

The adventurer looked up at the sky, but saw nothing worthy of remark.

"Well?" he said, perplexed.

"Don't you see it?" asked the herdsman, in astonishment.

"No; I don't see any thing but the sky."

"Not the moon?"

"Yes, of course I see the moon," Lope replied, considerably astonished; "but what of it?"

"The senor must be a stranger to this part of the country?" the herdsman said.

"I am, but I freely confess that I do not see that yonder moon which shines here is any different from the moon I have seen elsewhere," Lope observed, beginning to believe that he was dealing with a number of idiots, for he had noticed the herdsmen had been exchanging glances of wonder.

"Then you don't know any thing about this moon?" the herdsman said.

"How the devil should I know any thing about the moon?" Lope cried, impatiently. "I am not a star-gazer, and this moon looks to me exactly like every other moon of the same shape and size that I have seen elsewhere."

"Why, it's the same moon, of course," the herdsman said, slowly.

"Then why call my attention to it?"

"Because it's the Mexican Moon," said the herdsman, in a tone of awe.

"Shining over Mexico it naturally becomes the Mexican Moon," the adventurer replied, tranquilly.

"Yes, but it is only the Mexican Moon this month."

"What is it any other month?"

"Why, nothing but a common moon then."

Lope laughed at the conceit.

"So this month it is the Mexican Moon, and the Mexican moon is different from the common moon?"

"Yes," and all the herdsmen assented.

"Will you have the kindness to explain the difference, and also why it is termed the Mexican Moon?" Lope asked, his curiosity excited.

"Because it is the dangerous moon."

"Dangerous?" cried the adventurer, in wonder.

"Yes, for when this moon rises the Indians mount their mustangs and ride upon the war-path against the frontier settlements."

"Oh, I understand now!" Lope exclaimed. "If I leave the hacienda after dark, I am liable to fall in with some of these red warriors, for this is the frontier."

"Yes, that is it," the herdsman replied. "There is great danger, for, within the last twenty-four hours, the Comanches, decked in their war-paint, have been seen on the prairie within thirty miles of us here."

"Thanks for the warning," Lope said, gracefully. "I shall be prepared."

"Yes, senor."

And conducted by the herdsman, the adventurer entered the house.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

THE adventurer inwardly laughed as he was conducted in state through the hacienda.

"*Voto-a-brios!*" he muttered to himself; "this is the richest joke that I have ever heard of. What will Bandera say when he discovers who his visitor is?"

The little procession reached the door of the grand chamber of the hacienda.

The herdsman threw open the door widely, and with a profound bow, announced:

"Senor Don Lope, the Panther!"

The adventurer started in amazement; the sound of his name alarmed him.

He had thought his ceremonious reception a mistake—that he had been taken for another—but now it was evident that it was for him that the herdsman had waited.

That he had been led into a trap was his first thought. He glanced around him, but saw only smiling faces.

Within the apartment, by the center-table, sat Bandera, the usual cold and calm look upon his iron features.

"What the devil does all this mean?" questioned the adventurer, between his teeth.

"Enter, senor," said Bandera, with courtly politeness, noticing the hesitation of the Panther.

With a look of confidence upon his face, which the thoughts running through his brain belied, Lope entered the room.

The herdsman discreetly remained upon the threshold.

"Bring us candles, Pedro, and then withdraw," Bandera said.

The herdsman withdrew.

"I have waited long for you, senor," the master of the hacienda observed, a peculiar look upon his stern face.

"Waited for me?" the adventurer questioned, in some little surprise.

"Yes, I felt sure that you would come to-day."

"Now, how the deuce did he guess that?" Lope muttered, to himself, in wonder.

Pedro entered with lighted candles, placed them upon the center-table and then left the room.

"You expected me?" the adventurer said.

"Oh, yes; my servants have been waiting for you at the gate since early dawn."

The adventurer could not understand it; he cast a rapid glance around him, but saw no sign of danger.

Bandera noted the look.

"Do not be alarmed; there is no danger."

"Will you allow me a question?"

"Certainly."

"How did you know that I was coming?"

"You really must excuse my answering that," Bandera replied, coldly. "But, one thing I can tell you, and that is, that I not only knew of your coming, but I also know what you come to say."

Lope looked at Bandera for a moment in astonishment.

"Do you doubt the truth of my words?" Bandera said. "I will give you proof, then. You think that you have discovered one of the lost children of my brother Juan—one of the heirs to his estate of Bandera—and you have come to me to bargain for silence on your part. Am I not right?"

Lope was thoroughly astonished, and his keen wits instantly guessed that, if Bandera knew of his discovery of the heir, he also knew of his failure to use that heir as his tool.

"Senor, you are right," he said, gracefully; he felt that he was beaten, but determined not to allow Bandera to enjoy a triumph.

"I know, also, that the heir does not care to claim his estate, and refused to make any bargain with you."

Then, suddenly, into the mind of the adventurer flashed the thought of the little Mexican, Diego, the keeper of the wine-shop. He knew now where Bandera had procured his information.

"You have come to attempt to frighten me into buying you from making use of your knowledge?" Bandera continued. "I suppose that you already see that your plan is a failure?"

"You are quite right, senor," Lope replied, with perfect composure. "I confess that in this matter you have beaten me."

"And in this matter alone?" Bandera questioned, shrewdly.

A shade of annoyance passed across the face of the Panther.

"Have you not been also defeated in your quest for the other heir, the girl?" said Bandera, finding that Lope did not reply.

"You are always so correct that it would be folly for me to attempt to dispute your words," the Panther replied, sneeringly, thus attempting to hide the vexation which he felt.

"Shall I tell you what you have been doing this morning?" questioned Bandera, suddenly.

"Just as you like," answered the adventurer, carelessly.

"You rode this morning to the Mission-priest, Father Philip; you questioned him regarding a certain child that you gave into his care years ago."

"Did I?" and the adventurer smiled, with an air of perfect composure.

"Yes, and you found that the child had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. Am I still correct?"

"Oh, gospel truth!" exclaimed Lope.

"In this struggle of wits between us, one point alone have you gained; the leaden casket with the precious papers which prove the right of the heirs of Bandera to their vast estate is in your hands; but, even you, yourself, must admit that, unless you can find the heirs, the papers are of little value."

"Well, now, I am very sorry that you think so, for I was just going to offer to sell them to you," Lope said, carelessly.

"I do not think that I care to buy them," Bandera observed, coldly.

"Don't push a man too hard. I am at the wall; don't crush my flesh against the stones," the adventurer said, earnestly, his tone a strange contrast to his former flippant one.

"Good! now you talk sense; a man is never so wise as when he confesses that he is beaten."

"Exactly; you will buy the papers then?" Lope said, insinuatingly. "Of course, as one heir is dead, and the other is careless of the golden future that I could give to him, the papers are of no particular value to me. What will you give me for them—a hundred ounces?"

"A hundred devils!" cried Bandera, in astonishment.

"No; I don't want a hundred devils," replied the adventurer; "they are of no use whatever to me. You think that a hundred ounces is too high a price?"

"Are you mad?" questioned Bandera, in anger.

"Oh, no! Of course I shall try and get as high a price as possible."

"I simply buy them out of charity—"

"Yes, as we would throw a bone to quiet a snarling dog, eh?" questioned the adventurer.

"That is something like it," Bandera replied.

"What will you give, then?"

"A dozen gold pieces."

"A small sum for the papers which sway the destiny of a thousand broad acres," said Lope, reflectively.

"Accept or decline; it is your privilege," remarked Bandera, tersely.

"Well, then, I decline," the Panther said, quietly.

"You decline?" Bandera exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Yes."

"And why—your reason?"

"The price is altogether too low."

"Too low!" exclaimed Bandera, in contempt, echoing the words of the other.

"Yes, altogether too low for such valuable papers."

"The papers are of no value."

"Why do you wish to buy them, then?" cried the Panther, quickly.

Bandera shut his lips together, and there was an angry glare in his dark eyes.

"You are so wise—so crafty—so superior in wit to the humble individual called Lope the Panther, that he bows humbly to your judgment. You give me golden ounces out of charity—bah! Next you will turn and caress the snakes that bite you. The papers are of value, else you would not want them. The contest is not ended yet. So far you have the best of it, but my turn may come."

Bandera regarded the adventurer for a moment.

"You have had your word, now listen to mine," he said, sternly. "You have been received here with all honors—a jest of mine; I sometimes jest; I wished you to taste of honors and of homage for once in your vagabond life. I raised you up that your fall might be the greater; and now depart. From this time forth my spies will track your steps; I will discover where you have hidden the leaden casket, and then wrest it from you, despite your efforts."

"I defy you!" cried the Panther, in rage. "I have the papers, I will find the heir. She lives—I am sure of it!"

"Begone!" exclaimed Bandera, sternly.

The door was flung violently open and a herdsman, white with terror, rushed into the room.

"Oh, senor, they come!" he gasped, in broken accents.

"Who?" questioned the master of the hacienda, in surprise.

"The red devils—the Comanches!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE INDIAN'S OFFER.

BOTH Bandera and the Panther started in surprise.

"The Comanches!—where?" cried the master of the hacienda.

"Here—right at our gates—all in war-paint," answered the herdsman.

"It can not be!" Bandera exclaimed, in doubt.

"It is the truth, senor. Pedro and I were just at the gate when the red devils rode up. We closed the gate and gave the alarm."

"Did they offer to attack you?"

"No, senor; but we were too quick for them."

"*Voto!* it seems that I must remain under your roof, whether or no," the Panther said, with a smile.

"If the Indians have really surrounded us, your arm will be of service in the defense."

"Command me, senor," the adventurer said, with a graceful bow.

"I'll to the gate and see for myself. I can hardly believe that we are surrounded by them."

"Better go to the roof, senor—the moon is up, and by its

light you can plainly see the red devils," suggested the herdsman.

The three proceeded at once to the roof.

As the herdsman had said, the moon was up, and by its faint light the watchers could discern groups of dark figures on the prairie, a hundred yards or more from the hacienda.

The faint light of the moon was reflected back by the steel lance-heads which glittered in the center of the masses of dark forms.

A single glance convinced Bandera that the herdsman was right; the hacienda was surrounded by the warriors.

"They mean mischief," observed the Panther, standing by Bandera's side.

"I do not understand their strange way of acting," Bandera said, thoughtfully. "It is contrary to their custom thus to beleaguer a hacienda."

"As yet they have shown no sign that their intentions are warlike," Pedro, the herdsman, remarked.

"They do not come on a peaceful quest," Bandera said, as he noted the lance-heads shining silver in the moonlight.

Then from one of the dark groups a single warrior detached himself. Boldly he spurred his mustang right under the walls of the hacienda.

A tall and muscular warrior he was, fancifully decked in the war-paint.

He checked his horse suddenly and gazed upward at the little group assembled on the flat roof of the hacienda.

"Wah! the red chief would speak with his white brothers," the Comanche said.

"Let the chief speak," responded Bandera.

"The Comanche warrior would speak with the white chief, Bandera, in his wigwam."

"And why is that necessary?" asked Bandera. "The chief has arms in his hands; we do not talk with weapons."

With a single motion the Comanche drove his sharp lance into the prairie, the point downward; the keen-edged knife from his girdle followed the lance. Then the warrior held up both his hands to signify that he was unarmed.

"See! the warrior has no weapon; he comes like the dove, not like the eagle. Let the great chief open his doors, that the Comanche warrior may speak with him, face to face."

"Is yon brave the White Mustang?" asked Bandera, of Pedro, the herdsman.

"No, senor; the White Mustang always rides a white horse; besides, he is much younger than this chief."

A little knot of herdsmen with muskets in their hands were clustered together on the roof.

Bandera remained silent for a moment in thought; his eyes noted the armed men.

"I will hear what the savage has to say," he said at length.

"Keep watch with your men, and at the slightest sign of treachery fire upon them."

Then Bandera addressed the chief, who sat his horse, motionless as a statue.

"I will listen to what my brother has to say."

"It is good," said the Indian, laconically.

Bandera descended to the gateway, followed by the Panther.

The Indian dismounted, fastened his mustang to the lance sticking into the ground, and stalked to the gate of the hacienda.

The gate swung upon its hinges and the chief entered. The gate was instantly closed and barred behind him, but the stolid savage apparently took no heed of the fact that he was virtually a prisoner in the hands of the whites.

"Let my red brother follow me."

Bandera led the way to the grand chamber of the hacienda; the Indian followed without a word; the adventurer and a couple of herdsmen brought up the rear.

"Let my brother speak," Bandera said, as he halted in the center of the room, turned and faced the Indian.

"The White Mustang is the great chief of the Comanche nation," began the warrior.

"My brother is not the White Mustang," interrupted Bandera.

"When the white chief goes on the top of his big lodge again, let him look to the south by the river—let him rest his eyes on the warrior who rides a white mustang, and he will see the great chief of the Comanche nation."

"And my brother—how is he called?"

"Ah-hu-la is a great chief," replied the savage, sententiously; "he comes alone into the lodge of the white-skin with nothing but his bare hands."

"The red warrior has nothing to fear," Bandera said.

"The red chief never knew what fear was!" exclaimed the Indian, proudly.

"Let my brother speak and tell why the Comanches come with the night, and circle the hacienda of Bandera with their lances."

"The White Mustang is the greatest chief of all the Comanche nation; a thousand warriors grasp their lances at his nod."

"I have heard of the great Comanche chief; what does he desire of his white brother?"

"The wigwam of the White Mustang is empty; he wants a squaw to keep it warm."

Bandera started, bit his lip in anger and cast a glance of fire at the Indian, but the stolid chief never heeded it.

"The white chief has a singing-bird—the fairest in all the Mexican land; let her come and sing in the lodge of the great Comanche chief and there will be peace."

"Dog of a red-skin!" cried the father, in wrath. "Sooner would I lay my child dead before me with my own hand than give her to the embrace of a gory savage!"

The iron face of the Indian contracted as the hostile words fell upon his ears.

"Wah! it is good!" he said, slowly. "The white chief will not give his daughter to the Indian?"

"By my soul, but that you came here unarmed and trusting to my honor, I'd crush you to my feet like a poisonous reptile, for daring to make such an offer to me!" cried the enraged father.

"Squaws talk—warriors act," replied the chief, tersely, a tinge of contempt in his tone. "The Comanche has spoken—has the white chief answered?"

"Return to the White Mustang and tell him when the sun goes backward, then I will give my daughter to him!" cried Bandera, contemptuously.

"It is good. Now the red chief will talk more. Let the white-skin prepare; the red warriors are around him. The Mexican Moon has risen; the red chiefs are in the saddle and they ride to death. The White Mustang offers peace, out he can give war. The chief has said," and the Indian turned upon his heel to depart.

"Let the Comanche braves butt their heads against my walls until they break!" said Bandera, contemptuously. "With the morning will come the white chiefs from Dhanis, and they will scatter the Comanches as the panther scatters the antelopes."

"When morning comes, not one stone will remain upon another to tell where the lodges of the white chiefs once stood by the river; the scalp-locks will hang at the girdles of the red chiefs, and the bones of the white chiefs will whiten on the prairie." With a slow and solemn step the Indian stalked away.

The herdsmen opened the gate and the Indian disappeared in the gloom beyond caused by the shadow of the wall.

"Had I not better ride to Dhanis and bring assistance?"

Bandera turned and beheld the strange herdsman, Juan, at his side.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE MESSENGER.

THE little group, gathered together on the house-top, turned and gazed, with astonishment, upon the herdsman.

"You go to Dhanis and warn the garrison," Bandera said, reflectively.

"Yes," cried the half-breed, quickly; "with them soldiers I can return and beat away the Comanches."

"If he can reach the town without observation, and lead the soldiers of the garrison here, they can attack the savages in the rear and by surprise," Lope said.

Bandera thoughtfully surveyed the prairie, on which the Indians were clustering in little groups; apparently he was guessing the number of the foe.

Pedro, the old herdsman, guessed the thoughts of the master of the hacienda.

"It is but a small force, senor," he said, "only a raiding party. They have striven to frighten us by his big words. If Juan here can succeed in leading the soldiers down upon their rear while we sally forth and attack them in front, we shall give them such a beating as will make the red devils talk of the hacienda of Bandera for many a long year to come."

"Excellent counsel!" cried the Panther, his warm blood tingling at the prospects of a fray.

"It is good," Bandera said, slowly, and then he fixed his eyes upon the half-breed. "Do you think that you can succeed in reaching the town?"

"Yes, senor," replied the herdsman, readily.

"It will be a difficult matter for you to leave the hacienda without the knowledge of the savages, though," Lope remarked, his keen eyes noting the positions of the Comanches. "Their line reaches from river to river, thus half-circling us, and the Sego cuts off all escape in the rear."

The dim rays of the young moon gleaming down upon the prairie and dancing in wavy lines of silver light upon the glistening steel lance-heads of the savages, plainly revealed the position and numbers of the besieging foe.

"A mouse could hardly cross yonder prairie and pass the Indian line without observation in this light," Pedro, the herdsman, remarked.

"To reach Dhanis there are other ways than across the prairie and through the Indian line," Juan replied.

"Yes, by crossing the river, but, to do that, one must depart by the gate of the hacienda in full sight of the savages, and ere he had gone ten paces an Indian arrow would stop his progress," Pedro exclaimed.

"You have thought of some other path than by the gate of the hacienda," Bandera said. He had watched the face of the half-breed closely and had noticed the contemptuous smile that had played upon his stolid features at the speech of the herdsman.

"Yes," the half-breed replied, laconically.

"And that path?"

"Straight down the wall to the river's bank."

"How will you descend?" questioned Lope. "A cat could not find crevices wherein to place her claws, let alone a man."

"The lariat which holds the prairie mustang or the buffalo bull will sustain my weight easily," the half-breed replied.

"By the Virgin, a grand ideal!" cried the Panther, quickly;

"by knotting the lariats together you can easily get the necessary length."

"But the Comanches may be ambushed on yonder bank," Bandera remarked, with a keen glance at the dark line of bushes that fringed the opposite bank of the Sego.

The eyes of all the party were turned upon the river's bank.

Full five minutes they stood in silence and watched for sight of gleaming lance-heads or waving Comanche plume, but in the dark line of the bushes there appeared no signs of human life.

"It is not likely, senor, that the savages have crossed the river," Pedro said, breaking the silence, "as the stream apparently cuts off all chance of escape."

"Let me try; I can but fail," the half-breed said.

"You shall go!" Bandera exclaimed. "Pedro, go below and prepare the lariats; bring them up here. By standing together in a group we can hide Juan's escape from the eyes of the Indians."

Pedro departed at once.

"One thing puzzles me, senor," Lope remarked, watching the motionless groups of savages upon the prairie with anxious eyes.

"What is that?" Bandera asked.

"Why do not the red devils attack us?"

"They are waiting, doubtless, for reinforcements. I confess I do not understand their reasons for acting as they have. Their bold defiance and the warning of the attack is something so contrary to their usual custom that I am puzzled to account for it."

"May it not be a bold bravado intended only to frighten us into yielding to their demands?" Lope questioned.

"It may be so, and yet the Comanches should know Ponce de Bandera better than to dream for an instant that he could be frightened by empty threats."

A sudden thought flashed across the mind of the Panther.

"You are about to send to Dhanis for assistance; suppose that the red devils have already attacked the town, and your messenger finds there only a heap of ruins?"

"When the Comanches take Dhanis then the sun will fall from the skies," Bandera replied, contemptuously. "The prairie warriors tried that years ago. The guns of the fort mowed them down as the Norther dried grass. An Indian has a good memory; the Comanches will never face the brass pieces again."

Pedro's return with the lariats, securely knotted together, put an end to the conversation.

The three proceeded to the rear of the hacienda.

"Pardon, senor," said the half-breed, suddenly, "but do I not need a scrap of writing from you? At Dhanis they may not believe my words."

"Yes, I will write a line to the commandante," the Mexican replied.

Bandera left the house-top at once. Pedro sat down upon the roof and tested the knots of the lariat. The half-breed stood like a statue with folded arms, his eyes gazing afar off over the prairie. Lope approached him and quietly placed his hand upon his shoulder. The herdsman never stirred.

"A mission of danger you have taken upon yourself, my silent friend," the Mexican said.

The herdsman did not reply.

"It is not yet too late to make a bargain with me," Lope continued, persuasively. "If you escape from this night's peril, why not seize the fortune that is within your grasp?"

"Fortune! what is fortune?" questioned the half-breed, suddenly; "gold? and what is gold? yellow metal, which a man can neither eat nor wear. I would rather be the chief of yonder plumed and painted warriors, whose lances glisten silver in the moonlight, than own all the broad acres washed by the Sego's stream."

"Oh, gentle herdsman, go and be killed!" cried Lope, in contempt; "a man who despises gold ought to die."

"The scalp of Juan, the herdsman, will never dry in the smoke of a Comanche lodge," replied the half-breed, coldly.

Bandera's return put an end to the conversation.

The Mexican gave a note into the hands of the herdsman.

"There," he said, "give that to the commandante at Dhanis. If he will set out at once, he can take the savages in the rear, and, with our aid, strike them such a blow as will carry terror to the hearts of the red-skins and keep our frontier free of them for a year at least."

"I shall remember, senor," the herdsman said, securing the letter in his breast.

"Now how shall we secure the rope?" Bandera asked.

"Pass it around the chimney, senor," suggested Pedro.

The lariat was fastened and the end trailed from the roof of the hacienda to the ground.

"Use all speed possible," said Bandera, as the half-breed prepared to descend.

The herdsman swung himself from the roof, and by the aid of the skin rope descended to the ground. The three on the roof-top, grouped together, masked the movement. They watched the half-breed enter the water, saw him ford the river and emerge from the stream on the opposite bank and enter the line of shrubbery. Then they cast an anxious glance at the Comanche chiefs circled on the prairie.

Not a horse had stirred—not a warrior had moved; like statues they stood, the moonbeams gleaming down upon them.

"They do not suspect!" cried Bandera, in fierce joy; "and before the first gray streaks of morning light line the sky, I'll strike them such a blow that for months to come they'll curse the hour when they headed their mustangs toward the hacienda of Bandera."

Lope glanced first at the Indians, then along the way that the half-breed had taken, for the figure of the herdsman was not to be seen.

"Satan himself aids this man," he muttered; "the heir whom he has robbed of his estate, whose father he has killed, risks his life to bring assistance to him. I've lost all interest in the game."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE EXPEDITION.

DON ESTEVAN, the commandante of the garrison of Dhanis, was entertaining a merry card-party at his headquarters.

The hour was late, and the red vintage of old Spain had been freely passed around the board when an orderly entered and announced that two strangers wished to have speech with the commandante immediately on pressing business.

Excusing himself to his guests, Don Estevan withdrew from the festive scene. In the outer chamber he found the two Americans, Gilbert, the Mustanger, and Davy Crockett.

The commandante recognized them at once, for the strangers were well known to him.

From the grave look upon their faces the Mexican guessed at once that they came on important business.

"Welcome, senor," he said, in salutation, "you wished to see me?"

"Yes," replied Gilbert; "there is danger afoot; the Comanches are in the saddle."

"A 'tarnal red yearthquake!" added Crockett, emphatically.

"I have been informed that the Indians meditated an attack," the Mexican officer said.

"It's come for sure," ejaculated the prairie-fighter.

"Have you seen the savages?"

"Yes," Gilbert replied; "in quite a strong force, too, and riding toward the hacienda of Bandera. Myself and friend were on the prairie near to the hacienda when we detected the approach of the marauding party; so we came at once to give the alarm."

"You have done well, senor; but I do not think that there is much danger of the Indians attacking the hacienda. Bandera can muster quite a force, and from behind his adobe walls would give the insolent red-skins a warm reception."

"You do not think that they can succeed in surprising the hacienda, then?" Gilbert asked, anxiously.

"Very little danger of that," the Mexican officer replied. "Bandera knows the savages well; for ten years they have threatened him. His hacienda standing right on the border of what they claim as their country is a perpetual menace to them. He will not be taken by surprise, and an open attack he can laugh at. I thank you, gentlemen, for your warning, and in the morning will dispatch a force to look after these red devils."

Then, through the door with scant ceremony, bounded a man; water still dripped from his coarse garb and the red soil of the prairie was splashed upon his boots.

It was the herdsman, Juan.

"Commandante?" he questioned.

"I am he," the Mexican officer answered.

The herdsman drew a letter from his bosom and handed it to the Mexican.

Don Estevan opened, read it, and then an exclamation of surprise broke from his lips.

The two Americans watched him with anxiety; they guessed that the letter related to Bandera.

"'Tis from Senor Bandera," the commandante said; "he writes that his hacienda is besieged by the Comanches and asks assistance."

"Count me in as a volunteer!" cried the Mustanger, quickly.

"An' me too!" exclaimed Crockett. "Wake snakes! I'm r'ally sp'ilin' for a fight with the red-skins."

"The senor writes that the Indians are apparently not in strong force—only a small raiding-party, and that they have not attempted an attack, probably waiting for reinforcements. He suggests that I dispatch a force at once to take the savages in the rear, while at the same moment he will sally forth and attack them in the front."

"An excellent plan!" exclaimed Gilbert.

"If it will only work," said Crockett, dubiously; "an Injun's a good deal like a flea, when you put your hand on him he ain't thar."

"It is worth the trial, at all events," the commandante replied. "I will take command of the party myself. You know the position of the Indians?" and he turned toward the herdsman as he asked the question.

"Yes, senor," the half-breed replied.

"Do you think that you can guide us so that we can surprise them?"

"I will do my best, senor, but the Comanche is like the wild mustang, he hears with the wind."

"We can encircle them, though, by approaching them from the east and thus drive them into the river. What do you think of that plan, senors?"

"Wa-al, if you want my honest opinion, it seems to me a good deal like ketchin' skeeters in a fish-net," said Crockett, bluntly. "The moment they hear the hoofs of our mustangs they dust out over the prairie lively."

"We can try it, at all events," the Mexican said.

Gilbert did not speak. The moment the voice of the herdsman had fallen upon his ears, he had started in surprise and fixed his eyes earnestly on his face.

The movement was not unnoticed by the half-breed, and a shade of annoyance passed across his features; apparently he was not pleased at the scrutiny of the other.

"We will set out at once," the commandante said; "in ten minutes we'll be in the saddle."

"We'll be ready in five!" Crockett cried.

"You remain here," the commandante said to the herdsman. "I will provide a horse for you."

The half-breed simply nodded his head, but did not speak.

Crockett caught Gilbert by the arm.

"Come along!" he cried; "let's saddle the animals and go for the painted serpents!"

The Mustang followed Crockett into the open air; there was a strange abstraction in his manner, like unto a man wandering in a maze.

"I can not understand it," he muttered, as he followed Crockett down the street.

"Just as plain as the butt of my rifle," Crockett cried.

"We're going to surprise the Comanches with a lot of sabers dangling at our heels, and row enough to scare all creation."

"No, I do not mean that. I mean the herdsman who brought the news."

"What of the yaller cuss?"

"His voice and face—both are strangely familiar to me."

"Well, I didn't notice how he did talk, but now you speak of it, it 'pears to me that his figure head isn't altogether strange to me," Crockett said, thoughtfully.

"I do not remember ever having seen him before, yet his face is familiar to me, and I'll swear that I have heard his voice before."

"Oh, Jerusalem crickets!" cried Crockett, suddenly. "I've got it! He's the very image of old Bandera."

The Mustang shook his head; the explanation did not satisfy his mind.

By this time they had reached the little cottage which served for their present home.

The horses, already saddled, were in the corral back of the house, and speedily the two were in the saddle.

Riding up the street to the square, they found the soldiers mounting in hot haste.

The commandante had detailed some thirty men for the expedition, and ten or a dozen of the young seniors of the town had joined the force as volunteers.

Among them was Ferdinand Tordilla.

A glance of hatred shot from his dark eyes as he beheld the two Americans gallop into the square.

He had not forgotten the triumph of the Mustang when he produced the tail of the wild horse and claimed the golden ounces, and much he marveled that the American had succeeded in escaping from the lure laid for him by the White Indians.

The bugle-call rung out shrilly on the night air, and the expedition commenced its march.

First came the commandante and Juan, the half-breed—the guide—then the volunteers, and lastly, the soldiers, riding by fours.

They left the town behind, and northward trotted over the prairie.

Contrary to Crockett's expectations, the jangling saber-scabbards had been left behind, and the naked steel was thrust through the belts of the troopers.

"The Comanches are not in strong force?" the commandante said.

"No, senor," the half-breed replied.

"How many should you think?"

"Twenty."

"And what chief commands them?"

"The White Mustang."

"Caramba!" The Mexican was astonished. "He is the great chief of the nation; strange that he should lead so small a force."

"Twenty can steal as well as a hundred."

"A raiding party only?"

"Yes, senor."

CHAPTER XL.

THE COMANCHES' SNARE.

FOR a good half-hour had the members of the little expedition ridden onward, the faint beams of the new moon lighting them on their way, and then, at a signal from the Mexican commandante, had they halted.

Only a mile or so beyond lay the hacienda of Bandera.

"It is time to circle to the east," the Mexican leader said.

"Yes," laconically replied the half-breed guide.

After a few words of caution as to silence from the commandante, the squadron again proceeded onward.

Leaving the Sego, whose course thus far they had followed from Dhanis, the troopers proceeded at a slow pace over the prairie, heading to the north-east. A mile or so they rode, and then again they turned. They were now nearly abreast of the hacienda and about half a mile east of it.

Again they halted; again the words of caution, and then, onward they rode to the fight.

The sabers were loosened, the carbines unslung, and the hammers raised.

Slowly they approached, until, at last, they could see the dark walls of the hacienda rising in the gloom, but as yet no sign of the Indians.

"The red serpents have vamosed long ago," Crockett whispered in the ear of the Mustang, as they rode on side by side.

"Yes, it would seem so," Gilbert replied, every sense on the alert to discover traces of the foe.

"They ain't a-goin' to wait for us to gobble 'em up. An Injun can smell a white man a mile off every time, and they're powerful critters to run when they ain't strong enough to fight."

"Thank Heaven that she is out of danger," said the Mustang, earnestly.

"Kinder feel interested, don't you?" Crockett queried, with a grin. "I 'specks it's nat'ral, though."

Nearer and nearer the troop approached to the hacienda.

Eagerly the commandante rose in his saddle and tried to peer through the darkness which the faint beams of the moon vainly struggled to dispel.

"No signs of the foe," he muttered. "Either the Comanches gave up the siege long ago, or else our approach, noiseless as it has been, has scared them away."

"The Comanches are good warriors; they know how to run as well as fight," the half-breed said.

"I'll back a Mexican for running ag'in' a Comanche any day in the week," Crockett whispered in the ear of Gilbert.

"By the saints!" cried the commandante, in anger, "I would have given a round dozen of golden ounces to have had a brush with the red scoundrels!"

Hardly had the words left his lips when a score of dark forms rose apparently out of the earth, before the advancing horsemen.

Instinctively the horsemen pulled up their steeds and delivered a scattering volley at the daring foe without waiting for orders.

Little harm the leaden rain did the wild prairie warriors, cutting the air as it did, far above their heads.

With wild cries the Indians leaped on the backs of their mustangs, and rode off northward with the speed of the wind.

The prairie breeze bore back their exulting laughs of derision and their insulting defiance.

It was with difficulty that the commandante restrained his men from following in instant pursuit of the insulting foe.

"Steady in the ranks!" yelled the Mexican officer, almost using the flat of his saber to keep back the enraged soldiers and the hot-headed volunteers.

Crockett and the Mustang had drawn a little to one side, and with an expression of contempt on their features were watching the scene.

"The dod-rotted mud-heads!" muttered Crockett, in contempt. "The red serpents would make mince-meat out o' them, if they once got 'em strung out over the prairie. Durned if the king-pin ain't got more sense than the hull caboodle of 'em put together."

"If the Comanches had stood their ground and showed fight, the Mexicans would not have been so eager for the conflict," Gilbert observed, dryly.

"That's so," Crockett muttered; "the red heathens kin whip their weight in wild-cats when they feel like it."

With great difficulty the commandante got his men in line again.

"The red heretics will not give us a chance to fight 'em," the commandante said, in annoyance.

"Some other time, maybe," the half-breed observed. He had remained perfectly unmoved during the whole of the excitement.

"We'll onward and congratulate the senor upon his escape," the Mexican said, and again the troop proceeded forward.

"You will go, too?" Crockett whispered, in the ear of Gilbert.

"Why not? It is not often that I have a chance to visit the hacienda of Bandera, and I should be a fool indeed if I let this one escape me."

"Right, every time!" cried Crockett, earnestly. "You've got more sense in that head than there's skeeters in a cane-brake!"

With joyful cries the rescuing troop approached the hacienda.

Nearly all of the household were gathered upon the rooftop. From their post of observation they had beheld the coming of the soldiers and the hasty flight of the defiant foe.

Joyfully the members of the beleaguered household responded to the victorious shouts.

The soldiers halted before the gate of the hacienda. The heavy door swung upon its hinges, and those within poured forth to greet the troops without.

"Welcome, senor commandante," cried Bandera, as he grasped the Mexican officer by the hand; "by the Virgin! you came in a good time, although had I guessed the Indians to be as few in number as they really were, I myself, with my herdsmen, could have easily put them to flight."

"A party of horse-stealing vagabonds," said Don Estevan, in contempt, dismounting from his horse as he spoke.

"From their insolent defiance I imagined that the whole Comanche nation, led by the White Mustang in person, had come to thunder at my doors and demand my daughter as tribute."

"And did they dare do that?" questioned the commandante, in wonder, and a dozen voices repeated the question.

"Such was the demand," replied the aged Mexican. "Caramba! I could hardly keep the blood still in my veins. Could I have laid hands upon the fellow I would have stricken him to my feet, although he came under a white flag."

"If they had but waited, we would have taught them a lesson," and the commandante shook his head meaningly.

During the above conversation, Gilbert and Crockett had remained in the background.

The Mustang had looked long and eagerly among the little group who had come from the gate of the hacienda for the queen of his heart, the peerless Giralda, but he looked in vain; the Mexican beauty had not ventured beyond the walls of the hacienda. She little guessed that her lover was with the troop who had frightened away the Comanches.

"What in thunder has got into Jerusalem?" cried Crockett, trying to quiet the "Clay-bank" mustang, who was strangely uneasy. "From the way he is cavortin' round one would think he smelt a red-skin."

Hardly had Crockett uttered his speech when the war-cry of the Comanches rung on the air.

Forth from the clump of bushes which guarded the approach to the hacienda, up out of the very earth like demons, sprung the painted warriors. The prairie was alive with them.

A thousand strong at least the Comanches seemed to the startled Mexicans.

The truth flashed upon them in an instant; the flight of the Indians was but a trick. They had been led into an ambushade.

CHAPTER XLI.

A RUNNING FIGHT.

THE shrill war-whoop of the Comanches rung like a knell of doom upon the ears of the astonished Mexicans. Too late they guessed the snare that the wily Indian chief had laid for them.

The pretended flight was but a *ruse* to draw the Mexicans forth from the hacienda.

Vainly the astonished whites essayed to gain the doorway and bar out the foe, but the savage chiefs were too quick for them, and the struggling mass of humans, red and white, closed in together in deadly conflict, just by the doorway.

Outnumbered ten to one, the Mexicans fell before the keen lance-point and the long scalping-knife.

The soldiers, mounted, made a bold dash for the open prairie, but a line of mounted Indians, stationed beyond in a circle on the plain, hemmed them in.

With the desperation born of despair, the Mexicans charged fiercely upon the Indian line.

The shrill reports of the carbines rung out clear on the air. Fired in haste, and with little regard for aim, the red warriors did not suffer much from the discharge. And then came the closing in of the opposing forces. The Mexicans' sabers but idly parried the thrust of the Indian lance. One by one the Mexican dragoons went down in the bloody struggle.

The two Americans had remained a little apart from the rest, and the first note of the savage war-whoop warned them that a desperate struggle for life was at hand.

A single glance of agony the Mustang gave toward the doomed hacienda, and his hand nervously clutched the bridle-rein of the brown mare.

Crockett guessed the thought.

"Are you mad, Gil?" he cried. "They're a hundred to one against us. Let's put; we can help the gal better alive than dead!"

"Oh, heavens! this is fearful!" the Mustang cried, in agony.

"Ride for life!" Crockett exclaimed.

The Mexican soldiers had just charged onward, and the two Americans followed in their rear.

"Save your fire, Gil!" cried Crockett, drawing his pistols and raising the hammers, guiding the mustang by the pressure of the knees solely.

The hasty volley fired by the bewildered and panic-stricken soldiers called forth the caution.

And when the Indians and soldiers closed in together, the two Americans, bearing to the left, avoided the rush of the foe.

At first it seemed as if the two were about to escape, almost without a struggle, for only six or eight red chiefs were between them and the open prairie, and they were scattered over the plain.

A yell of warning went up from a red throat, as one of the chiefs beheld the two riding so steadily onward.

Thus warned, a dozen or so of the Comanches detached themselves from the struggling throng where the overpowered dragoons were being butchered and spurred onward in chase of the fugitives.

The position of the Americans was a desperate one; before them were six or eight well-mounted warriors, who had not yet reddened their weapons in white blood, and who panted for the slaughter; behind them a host of yelling demons, their appetites whetted for more blood.

At a single glance the two took in the situation.

"We kin outrun 'em, I think," Crockett said, as they rode rapidly onward; "ef we kin only break through that red coral of red sarpiants, we're good fur a dozen fights yit."

Then the mounted chiefs, as if actuated by a common impulse, drew bow to shoulder and the feathered shafts whistled past the ears of the fugitives.

Connption's tail!" growled Crockett, in disgust; "one on them derned skunks has barked the tip of my ear!"

The shave had been a close one, for the ear of the borderer was bleeding from the contact of the Indian shaft.

"Jerusalem! my head feels like a beehive!" Crockett exclaimed.

"A miss is as good as a mile, Davy," cried the Mustang, his spirits rising as the danger came nearer and nearer. "We must be within range; shall we give it to 'em?" The Mustang also rode, pistols in hand.

"Wait a minit; they'll go for us quick now; then pop 'em," Crockett said.

The chiefs in front, who barred the fugitives' way to freedom, with lance in hand and wild cries, came charging down upon the whites at the full speed of their fiery little mustangs.

"Now give 'em blazes!" cried Crockett, between his clenched teeth.

"Crack! crack!"

Two pistol-shots rung out on the air, and two of the foremost Comanche warriors went down on the greensward of the prairie, stricken unto death.

"Hooray!" yelled Crockett, in glee, as he noted the fatal effects of the pistol-shots.

A yell of rage and defiance burst from the throats of the red warriors.

The Americans had selected the two chiefs who formed the center of the half-circle. Their fall left an open space unguarded for the escape of the whites. Perceiving this, the Indians who formed the ends of the semicircle changed their course, in order to close up the gap and intercept the fugitives.

"That big cuss on the 'clay-bank' hoss is in range," Crockett said, grimly; "guess his time's come."

Again the sharp pistol-crack rung on the air; but the result was not as the scout had anticipated, for the chief's quick eyes had perceived the intention of the white, and he had endeavored to conceal himself behind the body of his mustang. The device was put into execution quick enough to save his life possibly, but not his person, for Crockett's ball passed through his shoulder, and he rolled from his steed to the prairie, disabled from all further action in the conflict.

Another howl of rage burst from the lips of the Indians.

The fall of the chief, though it added fresh fuel to their desire for vengeance upon the daring and desperate foe, yet made them less reckless in their attack.

The chiefs who were bearing down on the side of the Mustang swerved their horses to the right and galloped out of pistol range. The single chief still left on Crockett's side followed the example of his brethren.

"We've beat 'em!" cried Crockett, in triumph; "wake snakes and come at me!"

No obstacle now intervened between the fugitives and the broad prairie, which promised safety, but in their rear were twenty or more well-mounted Comanche warriors, burning with rage and thirsting to revenge the blood of their fallen comrades stricken down even at the very moment of victory.

An anxious glance the Mustang cast behind him at the maddened foe, and then he looked at the wiry little mustang ridden by the borderer. Crockett noticed the look.

"I think he'll stand it," Crockett said, dubiously; "he's a tough little cuss."

"They are well mounted," Gilbert said, with another earnest look behind.

"The leetle beast is a-doin' all he knows now, Gil. Are they gaining on us?"

"Yes."

"That's ugly."

"I have a plan," the Mustang said, suddenly. "Give me your rifle. I'll hold these devils at bay for a few moments while you push on. My nag is fresh and can easily outrun any mustang owned in the Comanche nation."

"I hate to run, but it's got to be did," Crockett remarked, as he unslung his rifle and handed it to the Mustang.

"If the red-skins suffer as much from all running foes as they have from you, they are to be pitied."

Then the Mustang halted his horse and half-turned in the saddle. He unslung his own rifle and held it suspended by the sling from his arm.

The foe came dashing onward, but as they beheld the single man coolly confronting them, they slackened their pace; they suspected a trap.

The Mustang waited calmly until the Indians slowly rode into range; then, like a flash, the rifle leaped to his shoulder and the bright flames that flared forth on the night told that the leaden missile had been sped.

A howl of rage came from the Indians as a brawny chief threw up his arms and tumbled from his mustang, shot through the lungs.

Prudence forgotten, the Indians dashed onward, fierce for vengeance.

Again the long rifle spoke, and again a savage went down with a groan of anguish. Then the Mustang galloped on and rejoined Crockett, loading as he rode.

Three times did the Mustang turn, and three times did Crockett gain ground, until, at last, in despair, the Coman-

ches gave up the chase, baffled, cursing the skill of the whites; then they took the backward trail.

Onward for Dhanis rode the two fugitives; soon they passed the adobe walls and told the fearful story of the capture of Bandera's hacienda, and the massacre of the Mexican troops.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE STRANGE ALLIANCE.

WITH white faces and bated breath, the citizens listened to the fearful story.

"All slain, say you, senor?" asked the officer left in command of the garrison, a stripling ensign, who looked pale and trembled as he thought of the responsibility now thrust upon his shoulders.

"It is barely possible that some few may have escaped," the Mustang answered; "but it is doubtful; the attack was so sudden and the Indians in such overpowering numbers, that your soldiers had scant time to prepare to meet the attack, and little chance to break through the lines of the foe. My friend and I escaped by a miracle."

"Do you think that the savages meditate an attack upon us here?" the officer asked.

"Beyond a doubt," Gilbert replied, quickly.

"But I should not think that they would dare to face the guns of the fort," the ensign said, growing more and more nervous.

"I reckon that thar's a thousand red Injuns 'tween here an' Bandera's ranche, an' they mean mischief," Crockett said, seriously. "Thar's r'ally 'nough of 'em fur to swallow us, let alone givin' us a fair fight."

"Would it not be best to abandon the town and retreat down the river?" the Mexican said.

A scream of remonstrance went up from the surrounding people at the bare thought of leaving their homes and household gods to the savage mercy of the fierce Comanche warriors.

"Wal, I should say, let the women an' children git, an' the he-folks stay an' fight it out," the borderer said, slowly.

A man, breathless with haste, dismounted from a smoking mustang and cast himself into the throng.

"Senor Capitan!" he cried, addressing the officer, "the Indians—the Comanches are below—advancing up the river; they come against Dhanis!"

A cry of astonishment broke from the crowd. The truth was plain; Dhanis was surrounded by the foe.

A few among the crowd recognized the speaker. It was the outcast son of Bandera, Luis. He had not yet heard the terrible story of the attack upon his father's hacienda.

A girl, wrapped in a dark mantle, came through the crowd and touched the young man on the arm. He turned, and she whispered a word in his ear. A joyful exclamation came from his lips, and then both he and the girl disappeared in the crowd.

"We must prepare to defend ourselves!" cried the Mexican officer, in great agitation. "It is useless to attempt to hold the town. We must all take refuge in the fort."

"But our goods—our houses?" cried the crowd, in chorus.

"It is our only chance for life," the officer replied. "I shall close the gates of the fort in half an hour. Let those who will remain without."

And the ensign instantly betook himself to the fort, followed by the soldiers who had mingled with the throng.

Crockett and the Mustang remained motionless, leaning upon their rifles.

"Wa-al, what do you think?" Crockett asked.

"Better take to the prairie; if we are shut up in the fort, we can do nothing for the rescue of my poor girl," the Mustang replied.

"She's putty sure to be in the Injuns' hands," Crockett said, thoughtfully.

"Yes," and the stout-hearted Mustang groaned aloud at the thought. "They will spare her life; spare her to become the wife and slave of some brawny Indian chieftain. I would far rather see her dead on the prairie, brained by a Comanche tomahawk, than know that she dwelt a degraded slave in the smoke of an Indian wigwam."

"Sartin; that's my pinion. I've got an idee! S'pose we rouse the lower town? This raid ought to rouse the Greasers up fur vengeance ef they've got any blood in their veins."

"The suggestion is a good one."

"And I will aid you to carry it out," said a deep voice at their elbows. They turned and beheld the strange being who called himself the Madman of the Plains.

"Follow me, and we will counsel together."

With awe in their faces, the two followed the maniac.

With a stealthy, noiseless step, the strange being led the way to the outskirts of the town.

The streets were filled with trembling Mexicans, hurrying their families toward the fort.

On the little plain, just beyond the town by the river's bank, stood a sturdy gray steed fastened by its lariat to a stunted bush. It was the charger of the Madman.

"Now we will counsel together," said the maniac, in his strange, deep voice.

The two Americans, in following their strange guide, had not forgotten their horses, and the three men and the three steeds stood together by the river's bank.

"I know all the events of the night," the madman said, in solemn tones. "I knew that the blow would fall when the Mexican moon rose full in the sky. I warned them, but it was fated that the Comanche should ride his wild mustang amid the ruins of Bandera. It is fated, too, that Dhanis shall fall. What can a handful of men do against a host of red wolves. Wise are ye that you choose the open prairie rather than the walled fort. So shall ye be saved while the others perish. It is their doom; I can not save them from it," and the wanderer shook his head sadly. "But now for action," and the strange being glared around him for a moment, pushed the tangled masses of hair back from his forehead, then spoke.

"You would seek assistance from the towns below to rescue your promised bride? Nay, do not start—I know your secret; couched was I, like the wild deer, in the bushes when the maiden confessed her love for thee. I saw the assassins steal in upon thee, and watched them fall and die; then saw him, the author of all evil, approach and question his dying instrument. His time will soon come—in the Indian wigwam, where the Concho cuts the plain—but not by the hand of a red-skinned warrior, but one as white as himself. Then, oh, Heaven! set me free, too!"

"His mind is wandering," whispered Gilbert in the ear of the borderer.

"No!" cried the maniac, suddenly; his quick hearing had caught the whispered words. "Not wandering, but coming home at last! Listen; do not go to the lower towns for assistance to win back the maid you love, from the ruthless red-man's power. The supine Mexicans will not venture life and limb for thee. The word 'Comanche' is a spell to fill with terror the hearts of all the dwellers from the Sego's stream even to the gates of Durango. You and I and this stout-hearted hunter will follow on the trail of the victorious savage, when, drunk with success, laden with rich spoils, reckless with easy triumph, he wends back his steps to his prairie home, where the Twin Mountains look down upon the head-waters of the Concho. A thousand strong the red warriors retreat, but the band breaks up as it enters the prairie wilderness; each chief takes his share in the spoil and departs for his own village. We will follow the band that bears Bandera and his daughter prisoners."

"But, how can we tell to which chief they will fall?" asked Gilbert.

"To-morrow question the ruined walls of Dhanis; ask the river, red with blood from the scalped bodies floating down its stream, the name of the author of the horrid work; along the line of the whole frontier ask which Indian chief has the bloodiest record; go into the desert, question the Apache or Navajo warrior the name of the great red king, whose bloody hand has left its mark from the great Staked Plain to the Mexican walls. With one voice all will answer, the White Mustang!"

"The Comanche chief!"

"More than chief; king!" answered the Madman, wildly. "A human wolf, with all the cunning of the fox, all the fierceness of the panther. He will carry back Bandera's daughter for his wife, but ere he weds the Mexican flower, another bride will glide into his wigwam and clasp him with cold arms that shall hold him till the last great trump is sounded, and saint and sinner alike rise to meet their Judge."

During the wild speech of the Madman the Americans had reflected. They saw at once how excellent was the advice, and how easy it would be to follow on the track of the retreating Indians, intoxicated with victory and laden down with plunder.

"But we ain't acquainted with the Comanche region," Crockett said, slowly, being about the only objection that he could think of.

"I am," replied the Madman, quickly. "I have walked within the Indian country till even the dogs know my foot-fall and bark not at me. I know the village of the White Mustang as the stars know the earth. Your horse is fleet, young stranger, so is mine; and for you the Indian corral holds many a good mustang. Decide! Will you go? The Comanches will soon be here; the White Mustang is an eagle who strikes quickly; Bandera has felt his talons; Dhanis will soon be shadowed by his wings."

"Go on; we'll follow," the Mustang said.

"Through thick an' thin," Crockett added.

"Come, then; to horse, and across the river; we must couch in the bushes while Dhanis blazes a beacon fire to call the red wolves in."

A minute more and the three were in the saddle fording the river.

And Dhanis waited in breathless anxiety for the dreaded Comanche warriors.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE SURPRISE.

DESPERATE was the struggle at the gate of the hacienda, but the Mexicans, taken by surprise, could offer but a faint resistance.

Bandera hardly had time to draw his saber when a dozen brawny chiefs sprung upon him and bore him over to the ground, despite his desperate efforts to shake off his assailants.

It was evidently the purpose of the Indians to make the aged Mexican a prisoner, for the chiefs struck no blows at him, though naked weapons were gleaming in their hands.

One by one the Mexicans went down, either killed outright, badly wounded, or else prisoners to the merciless foe.

The Indians poured into the hacienda, and the shrieks of the hapless Mexican maids resounded on the air. No violence was offered them except that their hands were bound. They were reserved for a fate far worse than death—a life of torture in the wigwams of the Comanches.

The prisoners secured, the work of plunder went on. The Indians ransacked the hacienda; then the torch was applied, and soon all within the house that could burn was in flames. The adobe walls, though, defied the malice of the Indians.

Giralda had been treated differently from the rest of the captives. Her hands were unbound, and a special guard seemed assigned to her. Her heart grew sick within her as she noticed the respect with which she was treated. She had lived too long on the frontier not to guess the reason; she had already been selected as the wife of some great chief.

Bandera and his daughter had been placed together. The Indians who guarded them were headed by the chief known as Ah-hu-la.

When the work of destruction was completed, Ah-hu-la pointed, with a grim smile, at the smoking ruins.

"Wigwam gone—prairie all Indian now. White Mustang, great chief, long time said great stone-house burn some moon," the Indian said, proudly.

"Where is the chief?" asked Bandera, who had not noticed among the Comanches any chief who corresponded to the description of the White Mustang.

"Gone to many lodges; come back soon; more scalps," replied the warrior, pointing southward.

Bandera understood at once; the Comanche leader had departed to attack Dhanis.

The Mexican looked around upon the prisoners; five men only had escaped the slaughter, and they were all herdsmen. Juan, the half-breed, and the adventurer Lope, were either among the dead or had escaped.

Some thirty of the savages only remained in charge of the prisoners. The others, after the conflict had ended, had departed at once, on the expedition against Dhanis, as the Comanche chief had said.

Bandera readily saw that the raid was no common one, but that all the fighting men the Indians could muster were engaged in it.

His blood grew cold when he thought of the defenseless condition of Dhanis; still, he had a faint hope that, by the use of the cannons of the fort, the garrison might succeed in beating off the savages.

The ensign in command of the fort was pacing up and down the little rampart. The men were clustered by the guns; citizens and soldiers were earnestly conversing, touching the coming danger.

Eagerly and with eyes strained by watching, the Mexicans gazed out upon the open prairie. Each moment they expected to see the plumed warriors emerge from the darkness and gallop, lance in hand, toward the fort.

Seconds lengthened into minutes, yet the foe came not. The silence of the grave reigned upon the plain.

Then the thought came to the watchers that, Indian-like, the Comanches were creeping in to surround the town, expecting to take it by surprise.

All within the village had crowded into the fort, leaving their homes to the cruel mercies of the Indians.

Suddenly on the gentle breeze of the prairie, came the sound of horses' hoofs striking on the soft sod.

The word went round:

"They come! the Comanches!"

The gunners blew their matches; soldier and citizen alike seized their weapons. The attack was upon them.

Louder and louder grew the sound of the horses' hoofs; nearer and nearer the horsemen came.

An old herdsman who had posted himself at an angle of the wall, carbine in hand, listened intently for a moment, then suddenly cried aloud:

"Their horses are shod, if they are Comanches!"

Then the welcome thought came to the Mexicans that, possibly, it was some of their own soldiers who had escaped the fight.

Eagerly they watched the dark figures that were coming so fast from the gloomy shadows which veiled in the distant prairie.

A few seconds and a joyous shout went up from one of the watchers on the rampart.

"The Virgin be praised! I see the glitter of the moonbeams on their helmets; it is our soldiers!"

The glad tidings went rapidly from lip to lip.

Then, from the gloom, into the misty rays of the young moon, galloped ten men.

Their helmets gleamed silver in the moonlight, and the faint rays danced also upon the bare saber-blades thrust through their belts.

"Ten out of thirty," muttered the ensign, in despair; "the savages have beaten us fearfully."

The men rode directly to the gate of the fort; they swayed unsteadily in their saddles, their heads bent down, evidently worn out with fatigue.

"Open," cried the first one of the soldiers; "the Comanches are right behind us!"

The soldiers in charge of the gate joyfully opened it at the welcome sound of the Spanish voice.

But, hardly had the gate swung on its hinges, and the soldiers started forth to greet their comrades, when a fearful truth dawned upon them. The moonbeams had shone down

upon Spanish helmets and Spanish uniforms, but worn by Comanche chieftains!

The wild war-notes of the Indian braves, bursting in triumph on the air, told the fear-stricken Mexicans that they were betrayed!

Then, from the shelter of the tall grass which had concealed their stealthy, snake-like approach, rose a thousand Comanche warriors.

On every side was Dhanis surrounded!

The soldiers at the gate strove in vain to close it. Taken by surprise, the Indians smote them down in sore disorder.

A minute of desperate fighting, and the ten Comanches in the gateway became a hundred.

Wildly the Mexicans on the rampart trained the cannon on the foe and fired. Vain were the shots; the Comanches, remembering the commands of their leader, had dashed in so quick, that the guns on the rampart could not be depressed sufficiently to rake their line.

Why tell the story of the slaughter, or relate the sickening details of the butchery? The Mexicans stood by their guns, and fell, one by one, fighting with the desperation of men who neither gave nor asked quarter.

An hour after the surprise, Dhanis was in flames.

The red savages ran through the streets of the little village, loaded with plunder and decked out in fantastical attire.

By the light of the burning dwellings, flaring upward against the sky, the Indians prepared to retreat.

A single chief, mounted on a milk-white steed, stood apart from the rest and gazed at the throng laden with plunder.

It was the White Mustang, chief of the Comanche nation.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE INDIAN CAMP.

"THE head-waters of the Concho, where the Twin Mountains look down upon the prairie."

The village of the White Mustang nestled by the stream.

As the strange being, who called himself the Madman of the Plains, had shrewdly guessed, the Indians had journeyed homeward, laden with their spoil, without caution.

And why should they exercise restraint? What had they to fear? That the Mexicans would attempt to rescue the prisoner and retake the herd of fat beeves, and the drove of horses which they carried with them, the spoils of victory? As little chance of that as of the sun falling from the sky. Where, on the frontier, would they get the thousand men to follow the Comanche to his village amid the mountains, and there snatch from his teeth the spoil his arm had won?

So the savages had journeyed on homeward without care.

Their losses in the raid had been trifling compared to the booty that they had gained in prisoners, beeves, horses and scalps; thanks to the skill with which their leader, the White Mustang, had planned the surprises which gave them the hacienda of Bandera and the town of Dhanis.

Gleefully then they pursued their homeward path—without care, without caution.

Bandera and his daughter had been treated with great respect. Both guessed the reason, and trembled when they thought of it.

At length the Indian village was reached. As the Madman had predicted, band after band had separated from the main body on the homeward march, and only the warriors of the White Mustang's village, some three hundred in number, remained when they struck the Concho and commenced to follow the course of the stream upward.

The village of the Comanche chief was situated in a little valley shut in by low hills, spurs of the Twin Mountains. The Concho ran through the valley.

It was a lonely spot; the timbered hills breaking the force of the wind in every direction. The prairie without abounded in game, while the limpid stream, which murmured over golden sands through the valley, was filled with fish.

Little wonder that the Comanche chief was proud of his home.

Bandera and his daughter were placed in two wigwams, close to the lodge of the White Mustang, and an ample guard stationed around it.

An hour after the chief arrived in the valley a second war-party came in, consisting of some twenty warriors, and they bore as prisoners Luis Bandera and Silver Spear, whom they had captured on the prairie just below Dhanis.

The half-breed was the woman who had accosted Luis in the square.

Then came a third troop, the last—ten warriors only—with a single prisoner, Lope the Panther.

The adventurer had remained on the roof of the hacienda, and from it witnessed the Indian attack.

At the risk of his neck he had dropped from the roof to the ground at the rear of the house, and plunged into the river. Emerging from the stream on the other side, he had followed the Sego down, and thus had fallen into the hands of the Indians coming up.

Lope was conveyed away at once and placed in a wigwam, but the girl and Luis first endured the inspection of all the tribe—the color of the girl being a puzzle to them.

At last they, too, were placed in a wigwam—quite a large one, and filled with buffalo-skins.

A guard was set before the door, and then the Indians withdrew.

But the guard was not the only watch upon the prisoners, for one of the chiefs laid himself down at the back of the wigwam, and, placing his ear close to the skin which formed the wall of the lodge, listened to the conversation of those within.

The two had had but little chance for conversation since their meeting in Dhanis.

"A gloomy prospect before us," said young Bandera, slowly.

"Yes," replied the girl, sadly.

"Answer me one question," said the youth, suddenly; "why did you tell me in Dhanis that we must part forever?"

"Because it was the truth."

"But the reason—do you no longer love me?"

"Because your father would never consent that you should wed me, the poor half-breed," the girl replied.

"My father cares nothing for me. He has disowned me. When you disappeared so suddenly, I resolved to find you if you were in Mexico. I sought my father's aid, and, in consideration of a sum of golden ounces, agreed never to let him see my face again. My father knows nothing of our love."

"There you are wrong; he knows every thing," the girl said, quickly.

"What makes you think so?" Luis asked, in surprise.

"Because he attempted my life. You shall know all now—the reason of my sudden disappearance. One night three men burst into my little cottage. I was on my knees, telling my beads. They seized, bound and gagged me, bore me from the house to a lonely spot by the river; there they were joined by a fourth man, evidently the leader. He was masked and wrapped in a cloak, but in him I recognized your father. The three men then bound me to the back of a wild steed, loosed their hold upon him, and sent me forth to death. It was a terrible ride. I shudder even now when I think of it."

"And you think that my father doomed you to this terrible death because I loved you?"

"What other reason could he have?"

"I can tell you that," said a voice, coming from beneath one of the buffalo-ropes, and the Panther stuck his head out from under the cover. "Strange things happen in this world, and it is one of those strange chances that I should happen to be placed in the same wigwam with you two, and overhear your conversation, as I am probably the only man in the world who can explain this mystery to you. But, first, a question," he addressed the girl. "Were you not brought up by Father Philip, the Mission Priest?"

"Yes, señor," the girl answered, in surprise.

"Do you remember any thing of your childhood?"

"A little."

"A great house—a sudden shock—a man carrying you on a milk-white steed across the prairie?" asked the adventurer, eagerly.

"Yes—I—I remember something like that, but it seems like a dream," the girl answered, slowly.

"It is reality!" the Panther cried. "I am the man who rode with you on the milk-white horse. Young sir, you are the son of Ponce de Bandera; this girl is the daughter of your uncle, Juan de Bandera, whom your father murdered that he might seize his estate. She is your cousin, and the rightful heir to all the broad acres of Bandera."

"Is it possible?" cried Luis, in intense surprise.

"It is possible," the Panther replied, firmly. "In Dhanis I have the papers to back my words. In Dhanis! I forgot—the savages have given it to the flames. It is of little consequence now, though," he added, with a grimace. "Ponce de Bandera bound you on the back of the wild horse and sent you forth to perish in the desert because you were the daughter of the man he killed, because you were the heir that might some day rise up in his path and dispute his claim to the estates of Bandera. While you lived, he feared. This is the secret. If I had known ten days ago what I know now, this hour I would have been in the city of Mexico, jingling a thousand golden ounces together, instead of being here a miserable captive in the hands of the Comanches." And the adventurer groaned in disgust.

"I can hardly believe this wondrous story," Luis said, in astonishment.

"It makes very little difference now," the Panther said; "Bandera is a home for the owl and the coyote, and we, helpless here."

"We may be able to buy our ransom," said the young man, hopefully.

"Buy! With what?" asked the adventurer. "The herds of Bandera are already in the hands of the Indians."

"Alas, I fear that we are lost!" the young Mexican exclaimed.

"Let us hope," the girl said; "let us not give way to despair until the last hour comes."

An Indian entered the lodge; it was the chief, Ah-hu-la. He assisted the captives to rise and bade them follow him.

An escort of braves conducted the three to the end of the valley. There they found horses waiting. The arms of the captives were unbound.

"Mount and ride," said the chief. "The White Mustang gives you your freedom," and he placed weapons in their hands.

Amazed, the three mounted and set forth. Soon they were on the prairie, speeding rapidly southward.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE REVELATION.

GIRALDA sat alone on her couch of skins. Her thoughts were sad ones. Torn ruthlessly from all she loved, and a terrible fate before her, she doubted not that she had been spared to become the wife of some Comanche chief.

Suddenly the doorway was darkened, and a tall figure resplendent in war-paint, and in a gayly decorated garb of deer-skin, stood before her.

"White maiden, look up," said the chief, in excellent Spanish. "See White Mustang, great chief of the Comanche nation."

The tones of the chieftain's voice sounded strangely familiar to the ears of the girl, yet she had never seen the haughty Indian before.

"Will the white singing-bird come and sing in the wigwam of the great chief?" he asked, softly.

Giralda shuddered; her thought was true; she had been reserved for a dreadful fate.

"Why does the white bird shrink from the chief? Does she fear the Comanche warrior?"

"The white bird can not mate with the red chief," she answered, slowly.

"Why not?"

"Because she loves another."

The white hunter with the long rifle—the horse-tamer? Wahi! the White Mustang will take his scalp, and it shall dry in his wigwam."

Giralda looked at the chief for a moment, a glint of the old-time fire in her eyes, but she made no answer.

"The white bird is angry with the chief—angry because he loves her and hates the horse warrior," the keen-witted savage said, slowly. "Does the white bird guess why the Comanche chief led his warriors to Dhanis?"

"The chief came once before," the girl said, a covert gleam of malice in her dark eyes.

"And went back—quick—too," replied the Indian. "The Comanche does not forget. Too few warriors then—plenty now. Will white bird sing in the lodge of the chief?" he asked again.

"I can not."

"White bird love her father much?" the chief said, slowly.

Giralda trembled at the question; she guessed the ordeal that was coming.

"Yes," she answered.

"Does she wish to see him burned at the stake, the Comanche warriors dancing around him and laughing at his despairing cries for mercy?"

Giralda covered her face with her hands in despair.

"The Mexican girl will see her father die unless she consents to become the squaw of the chief," the Comanche said, firmly. "If white bird consents, the old chief shall go free."

Giralda was in agony, but her woman's wit came to her aid.

"Will not the chief give the white bird time to think? She is a helpless prisoner in his hands; she can not escape?"

"How long?" asked the Indian, laconically.

"Give me all the time that you can," pleaded the girl.

"To-morrow at this time the chief will come for his answer. Let the white bird make up her mind. Either she comes and sings in the lodge of the White Mustang, or else the old chief dies at the stake. The White Mustang has spoken; he never breaks his word." And with this assurance, gravely delivered, the Indian left the wigwam.

Giralda's heart was full of agony. She had gained the respite of a day, but what chance of escape would that day bring? She was many miles from the Mexican frontier, right in the heart of the Indian country. A large and well-armed force alone could hope to cope with the savage foe in their stronghold.

Then to her mind came the thought of her lover—the darling Mustang.

"Oh, if he only knew my peril!" she murmured in despair.

There is a subtle glamour in the passion we call love which distracts the senses. The presence of Gilbert, the Mustang, alone, near the Indians' camp, would have given more hope to Giralda's heart than the knowledge of a regiment of Mexican soldiers marching to give the Indians battle.

How her heart would have rejoiced had she known that, even as the Indian chief uttered his threat to force her to become his, from the wooded heights of the western hill which overlooked the valley, her lover, with anxious eyes, gazed down upon the Indian village, and vainly tried to guess which wigwam held the prisoner so dear to his heart.

It was night.

Bandera in darkness sat upon his skin couch and gloomily meditated upon the events that had transpired so rapidly.

The abrupt entrance of an Indian chief into the wigwam, bearing a blazing torch, roused him from his abstraction.

Bandera looked up, then started in surprise. Though decked out in the buck-skin hunting-shirt and leggings of the Indian warrior, and his face lined with the war-paint, yet the old Mexican recognized his visitor at once.

"Juan!" he cried, in wonder.

He spoke the truth; it was the half-breed herdsman, Juan, who stood before him. We know him better, though by another title!

Proudly the chief folded his arms and drew up his tall figure to its utmost height.

"No half-breed herdsman—no slave to the pale warriors,"

"No half-breed herdsman—no slave to the pale warriors," he said; "the White Mustang is the great chief of the Comanche nation."

The Indian had thrown off the mask. Juan, the herdsman, and the great Comanche chief, were one and the same.

In blank amazement the Mexican gazed upon the Indian. The strange discovery had rendered him speechless.

"The White Mustang laid aside his plumed head-dress, washed the war-paint from his face, and stole like a snake into the walled lodge of the white-skinned. He became a white brave that he might betray them unto death—that he might win the Mexican singing-bird, Giralda, for his own. He had sworn by the great Wahcondah never to rest while the great lodge of Bandera frowned upon the prairie. He spoke loud, and the walls fell."

"This is a fearful retribution," the Mexican murmured.

"When the White Mustang took the walls of Bandera and drove off the fat beeves and the branded horses, he only took what belonged to him. The Indian chief has the blood of the pale-faces in his veins. Let the white chief look at me well. Does he not see in my face his own?"

"Yes—yes," Bandera muttered, slowly.

"When the red chief forgot that he was born an eagle, and became a fox to steal into the white wigwams, he met a white brave who told him strange things—who offered him great heaps of yellow metal, and said that he was a chief among the pale-faces. The red brave laughed to scorn broad acres and golden ounces. What were these to him who claimed the great prairie as his own, whose land was bounded only by the rising and the setting sun, who knew where the pure water ran over golden sands and the mountain-pocket held big lumps of yellow metal? He did not care to buy the secret of his birth, for he would not dwell in the land of the pale-faces if it was all given him, from the great prairie to the big waters. But the words of the wily pale-face sunk deep in his heart; he spoke of a sister, and the white Indian remembered something of his childhood."

"Have you guessed the secret?" Bandera asked.

"The chief knows all," the savage answered.

"The Comanche captured a red-and-white girl in the ride against the frontier, half-Indian, half white, like the great chief of the Comanche nation. The chief listened to the talk of the captive maid in her wigwam, and soon his heart told him that she was his sister. The White Mustang is the son of Juan Bandera and the Indian girl; he is the heir to Bandera."

The chief drew himself up proudly as he proclaimed his right.

"I confess you speak the truth," Bandera said, slowly. "I am in your power; do with me what you like, for I killed your father."

"The red chief does not care for that; he will not go backward. The white blood in his veins has already spoken; his sister and the two white braves with her are free. Mounted on the Indian horse they ride for the walled lodges. The white blood will speak no more. The chief is all Indian now. Let the Mexican tell his daughter that the White Mustang is her cousin, that she must be his bride and remain forever the sunlight of the Comanche's home. Then the old chief shall go free, or he may stay in the land of the Indian, and the red chiefs shall honor their father."

"I will speak to my daughter," Bandera said, slowly; but in his heart there rose the wild thought that, sooner than see his pearl the wife of the white Indian, he would kill her with his own hand: and within his soul he prayed that Heaven might send a weapon for his purpose.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE MADMAN STRIKES.

THE Indian watched the old Mexican for a moment, a gleam of satisfaction upon his face.

"It is good," he said, with an air of triumph; "The white chief will speak—the white bird will come and sing in the lodge of the chief of the Comanche nation, and bear him young braves whose deeds on the war-path shall make the name Comanche a word of terror to both red chiefs and white."

With a haughty carriage the chief stalked from the tent, leaving the torch blazing within. Hardly had the Comanche warrior emerged from the wigwam into the darkness of the night, when a strong arm clutched him by the throat, and choked back the war-cry of alarm that else he would have given.

Vainly the Comanche struggled; he was in a grip of iron. His face became purple.

Supple as a serpent, the unknown foe coiled himself around the doomed Comanche. He bore him over to the ground. Almost noiseless was the struggle; so helpless was the chief in the terrible embrace of his foe.

As the chief struggled, he vainly tried to call the brave who kept watch upon the lodge of the prisoner. He little guessed that the stout-limbed Ah-hu-la lay not ten paces from him, stone-dead, a broad knife-blade driven through his heart.

In stifled gasps the life-breath of the Indian came. The hand of steel that grasped his throat relaxed not, but the pressure grew more intense. The blood gushed from the nostrils of the chief in dark, clotted drops.

A great convulsion of the knotted sinews, a gasp more dreadful than any of the former, and the White Mustang, the great chief of the Comanche nation—Juan, the lost heir of the Bandera estate—lay a lifeless corpse in the shadow of the wigwam, choked to death.

No mark of violence upon the body of the stalwart Indian except the necklace of blue around his throat—the war-paint of the stranger's hand!

After a careful glance into the distorted face of the once-great warrior, the conqueror rose to his feet.

A careful glance he gave around. No sign warned him that danger was nigh.

The Comanche, drunk with victory, dreamed not that a desperate foe had followed him from the Mexican frontier to his mountain home—dreamed not that the great fighting-man of the Comanche nation, who had escaped bullet and lance, saber, tomahawk and scalping-knife, on the prairie battle-field and in the Mexican town, had fallen by the hand of a single foe and in the heart of his own village.

The assailant of the chief raised the body in his arms and entered the wigwam.

Bandera started in wonder, as, by the light of the blazing torch, he beheld the lifeless form of the great Comanche chief cast at his feet, and the terrible Madman of the Plains, knife in hand, glaring upon him!

Bandera recognized the maniac at once.

"Behold the red wolf robbed of claws and teeth!" cried the Madman, in his hoarse tones, pointing to the terrible evidence of his power; "and now, Ponce de Bandera, prepare for death, for your hour has come."

Bandera sprung to his feet in alarm. The purpose of the maniac was evident. His blood-shot eyes, the gleaming knife in his hand, the blade already crimsoned here and there with blood—the life-current of the stout Comanche warrior, Ah-hu-la.

"Keep off!" cried Bandera, wildly, with outstretched hands; "would you murder me?"

"Murder! I am the Sword of Gideon, sent by the Lord of Hosts to sweep you from the earth. You have lived long enough; your crimes are scarlet—your victims call aloud to Heaven for justice. Look at me well, Ponce de Bandera, thou second Cain. Twenty years have left their prints on time's record since you and I have met. Do you not remember me? This red wolf I brought into the world, and now I have sent him hence. Her eyes approve the deed, and they call for your blood also. I am your brother, Juan de Bandera, the man you tried to kill, whose wife you murdered—whose reason you destroyed. The Madman of the Plains strikes one more blow and then he dies. The red dogs think that I am a spirit, fresh from hell, because I have used the secrets of the chemist's art to frighten them from their prey. The alcoholic flame has played around my temple, the Greek fire has flashed in my hands, the steel breast-plate has protected my heart from their balls; but I am only a man, a worm of earth, and must die, but you first."

With the spring of the panther the Madman leaped upon the Mexican. Vainly Bandera endeavored to defend himself. A single thrust and the broad-bladed knife found his heart. A groan of anguish and Bandera sunk upon the floor of the wigwam, dead.

Attracted by the noise of the struggle, the red braves gathered around the wigwam. A howl of rage resounded on the air when they discovered the body of Ah-hu-la!

Then, from the wigwam, darted the terrible Madman. He bore the body of the white Mustang in his arms, and cast it into the crowd.

The Indians gave way in horror before him. Then through the Indian village, striking left and right with the tomahawk that he had taken from the body of the dead chief, he ran.

With cries of rage, recovering from their stupor of fright, the Comanches followed him.

Men, squaws and children all came. Forgotten now were the prisoners—forgotten everything but the terrible being who was leaving a trail of blood and death behind him.

Up the steep hill's side, bounding from rock to rock, the Madman went, the Indians following wildly in his rear, sending a shower of arrows after him.

Seemingly unharmed, the Madman gained the highest peak of the mountain range. Before him the canyon, sheer down a hundred feet to the dark stream below; behind him the yelling savages, cutting off all chance of escape.

Upon the mountain peak, his dark figure looming gigantic against the sky, and the dim moonbeams shining down upon his waving locks of hair, the Madman hurled a last defiance at the red foe.

A moment his figure remained motionless upon the rock, then shot, arrow-like, through the air.

Down the canyon's side headlong he went into the dark abyss below.

The night-birds fluttered from their gloomy homes in the rock side as the rustling body went by them.

The Comanches reached the cliff-top and gazed down in horror.

The Madman had found a grave in the dark pool at the bottom of the canyon, by whose brink human foot had never trod.

Profiting by the dire confusion occasioned by the terrible Madman, the Mustang and Crockett, having been led by that strange being to the wigwam which contained Giralda, a prisoner, before he made his attack upon the Comanche chief, conducted the girl from the wigwam, and in the darkness gained the shelter of the hill. As a parting gift, the Madman had given his gray steed to the borderer to aid the escape of the girl.

The three rode night and day without waiting for food or rest, till they reached the wooded defiles of the Rio Sabinal.

There, feeling safe from pursuit, they halted and held counsel together.

Giralda willingly agreed to become the bride of the Mustang, but only pleaded for delay until she could learn her father's fate.

In Castrovilla, where the three sought refuge, from an Indian runner she learned her father's death.

Sadly she mourned that father's loss; but, in time to come, in the love of the Mustang in their home by the banks of the beautiful Tennessee, she forgot the sorrows of the days that were past.

Luis Bandera wedded the half-breed, the Prairie Mazeppa of the Texan Prairie, and became an altered man. No more the gaming-table and the wine-cup, but the horned cattle and the wild horse brought him both fame and fortune.

The Panther left the frontier. In Mexico he joined a revolutionary band, won a high position, then fickle fortune changed; he was captured by his foes and died by the garrote, reckless and defiant—"game" to the last.

For Crockett, our border lion, the pages of history tell how well he fought and how nobly he died the victim of Mexican treachery.

And the estate of Bandera has, for its heirs, the owl and the coyote.

THE END.

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